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Battlestar GALACTICA 12

“DIE, CHAMELEON!”

SCIENCE
FICTION

BY GLEN A. LARSON AND
ROBERT THURSTON

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“DIE, CHAMELEON!”

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"Ease up, both of you," Apollo said.

"Carome, Commander Adama has given me full authorization to negotiate with you and your followers. If you turn over the helm to me immediately, no recriminative action will be taken. All of you—"

"You call that negotiation? You order, and we fold up?"

"The commander's word—"

"I'm supposed to believe the commander's word?"

Croft stepped forward.

"I'll vouch for it, Carome."

"You can't even vouch for slime rats, Croft," Carome sneered. "I don't even want to—"

"Hey, hey," Apollo intervened, "let's cool this off. We can go somewhere and discuss this—"

Carome turned and played to the mob.

"I'm not gonna continue this little stage-show. We got interest in you, as the commander's son. Grab him, men. And the other."

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Battlestar GALACTICA12 "DIE, CHAMELEON!"

"DIE, CHAMELEON!"
Novel by Glen A. Larson and Robert Thurston
Based on the Universal Television Series
"BATTLESTAR GALACTICA"
Created by Glen A. Larson



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CONTENTS

Chapter ONE	Chapter FOURTEEN
Chapter TWO	Chapter FIFTEEN
Chapter THREE	Chapter SIXTEEN
Chapter FOUR	Chapter SEVENTEEN
Chapter FIVE	Chapter EIGHTEEN
Chapter SIX	Chapter NINETEEN
Chapter SEVEN	Chapter TWENTY
Chapter EIGHT	Chapter TWENTY ONE
Chapter NINE	Chapter TWENTY TWO
Chapter TEN	Chapter TWENTY THREE
Chapter ELEVEN	Chapter TWENTY FOUR
Chapter TWELVE	Chapter TWENTY FIVE
Chapter THIRTEEN	Chapter TWENTY SIX
	EPILOGUE

For Jason

And Russell Faison of the
146th St. Squadron

CHAPTER ONE

Wherever you go in the universe, on the wilder as well as the more civilized planets, families tend to gather in central areas where the main objective is to retreat from social and personal difficulties in order to engage in recreational activities. There seems to be an urge in most societies to free the mind of its necessary clutter for a while and escape into less important interests or perform the household duties which, though annoying, must for some periods of time hold the attention of certain family members.

On a backwater-galaxy planet whose unpronounceable name translates as "The Joyful Land," such gatherings ritualized family love and affection. As with most families, their feelings for each other were not often blatantly displayed, but they were nevertheless quite evident in their ease with each other, and in the kind of household calm which, while occasionally interrupted by admonitions and even anger, had settled into their homes.

The father of one family, Trinzot, sat serenely in his society's version of an armchair, a bulbous item stuffed with the feathers of an indigenous bird. The feathers were soft, and Trinzot felt relaxed with the scroll he was reading. As he read, he unrolled the scroll in slow, steady movements. He was a tall man, not too thin, with eyes that appeared to change color in different lights. Usually they were violet or dark blue. In the subdued light of his living room, they tended toward the purple shade.

His wife Diova puttered around the room, picking up the debris of her family's neglectful habits. She was very much a domesticated woman, scorning the independence of the more rebellious women of her home planet (which was not The Joyful Land, although she could no longer remember what its name had been). She was a petite woman, carrying

a little too much weight for her small frame, and the strain of her frequent smile never showed.

Their children sat in the middle of the room, on the floor, playing with their favorite toy. The boy Brynt was the oldest child. He was blond and rather calm for his age. The elder girl Chandra, a round-faced child with the nervous habit of drumming her fingers against the floor, as a rule displayed more energy than her brother. The younger girl Zossie, tiny and quite lovely, backed away from all confrontations with her older siblings.

The toy that held their attention was an Imagescan, a holographic projection device that displayed a complex scene in an oval field around which they sat. At the edge of the scene, objects and people seemed out of focus but the central portion was vivid and quite busy with detail. At the moment a pitched battle was going on among large groups of small humanoid figures. The setting of the battle was a section of a city with several decaying warehouses.

Without interrupting her straightening of a group of knick-knacks on a table, Diova addressed Trinzot. "What are you reading, dear?"

Trinzot replied without looking up from his scroll. "New story from the Ennay, dear."

The Ennay was the Narrative Association, supplier of printed fiction to the people of The Joyful Land.

"I must say," Diova commented, "the Ennay people are doing their job well, and with such admirable efficiency. At the scroll-store this morning I saw at least ten new pieces."

"Yes," Trinzot said. "Ennay is clearly functioning at max level without losing an iota in quality factors."

Diova nodded. She now sat at the edge of the living room rug, picking up fuzz balls with her dainty fingers.

"I agree," she said. "You know, I just finished the story you gave me two days ago. It was wonderful, as you said. I loved the part where that big fish invented land-gills and joined the society of its former enemies. What a fine lesson."

Trinzot looked up from his scroll.

"It's good to have the traditional values reinforced in stories like that, isn't it?"

"Yes," Diova said, not realizing her reply was automatic, the one intended by the scroll-story of the big fish. "It's important for the community to welcome all strangers, even its former foes."

Trinzot's commentary was just as automatic. They held conversations like this about every scroll-story they shared.

"We can all pull together," he said, "for the greater good and the shining ideals."

Trinzot's calm assurance comforted Diova, making her feel even more content with her comfortable lot.

"Oh my, yes," she said. "What's the new story about?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to give it away. It's about dreams of home, I'll tell you that much. How we must value our homelands but look to the future and our lives here, in The Joyful Land."

"The Joyful Land."

Diova's echoing of her husband's words was filled with awe, plus some wonder at the continuing good fortune of her family.

Her memories of her home were not at all clear. She had been taken away from it when she was a child. She recalled fields greener than those of The Joyful Land, cities with technological wonders that even the technologically wondrous Joyful Land did not have. She sometimes wished she could return there for a visit just to see if her past impressions were correct, but on the whole she did not mind

staying in The Joyful Land. She would never give up her residence here to return to her home, that was certain. There was so much love and affection in The Joyful Land that she could not imagine a more loving and affectionate planet.

Trinzot's remembrances of his former land were clearer, although he had even less urge to see it again than his wife. He had not been happy there, a failure at his job, a man with a dangerous tendency to go too far with any indulgence.

Neither of them remembered how they got to The Joyful Land, but it was not a problem that bothered them at all. Since they were so happy here, there seemed no reason for nostalgia.

"Looka that, will you?" Zossie cried. Her eyes so wide they appeared to have more height than width, she pointed to the scene being enacted on the floor in front of her. The tiny holographic human figures there were fighting a frantic battle against some aliens. The aliens had round metallic bodies supported by very long pipestem legs. They seemed to hold weapons in their teeth. The weapons emitted thick blue rays which started tiny fires on anything they hit. In the sky miniature spacecrafts shot at each other. Once in a while a direct hit caused a ship to break into fragments which sailed outward, then drifted toward the living room floor before disappearing like dust at the bottom of a shaft of light.

Small human figures fired upward at the aliens and dodged debris falling from explosions on the buildings. Debris was piling up all over the miniature city's streets, and authentic-looking dust clouds and apparent fire and smoke were scattered throughout the little city.

Brynt, in charge of the holographic manipulation controls, nervously fingered a brace of toggles without flipping them.

"Where's the Starbuck?" he shouted to his sisters.

Pointing, the ever-vigilant Zossie replied, "He's over there, behind that car."

Brynt shifted his position to see that area better. Crouched behind a red and black vehicle was, indeed, the Starbuck. The Starbuck's blond hair glowed brighter than the fires that surrounded him, and, even in miniature, his steely blue eyes could be seen vividly by the comparatively gigantic children. The two girls were especially fascinated by the Starbuck's gleaming eyes.

This Starbuck was very much like the famous Starbuck, ace Viper pilot of the *Battlestar Galactica*. His friends and enemies aboard that redoubtable ship would have recognized him in the small moving facsimile on this living room floor. They might have discerned that the replica was handsomer than the original, his jaw somewhat firmer, his chin coming to a more dauntless point. The color of the real Starbuck's hair was more like straw than the deep golden hue that seemed to radiate from the holographic figure's locks, and Starbuck's eyes, however compelling, never glowed like that or got that kind of hard metallic look. However, the tiny figure was recognizable as the *Galactica* pilot, all cleaned up and unblemished. It was, in fact, the mythological version of Starbuck, formed by tales of his heroic exploits. The tales were exaggerated, and so, in a way, were the physical characteristics of the holographic version.

His legs, lean and muscular, spread in a fearless stance, the Starbuck shot fiercely at the enemy aliens. Most of his shots were right on target. Wounded or dead aliens fell on top of other fallen aliens at a rapid rate. Next to the Starbuck was a beautiful woman. It seemed the mythological Starbuck did, at least in this way, strongly resemble the original.

"I want to see the Starbuck closer," Chandra said quietly. She generally spoke softly. In most seen but barely heard

children this was an attractive trait, but in Chandra it often meant sinister things. She never spoke more softly, for example, than when she was wrathful.

"Okay," Brynt agreed, "I'll magnify."

Examining his control board carefully, he chose his settings and flipped a few knobs and toggles with a graceful expertise. The scene at the center of the children's gaze shifted to a closeup view of Starbuck and the woman crouched behind the vehicle. Now the human figures were larger, almost the size of Zossie, who, when the view was magnified, liked to think of the Starbuck as her imaginary companion.

"Turn up the sound, Brynt," Chandra ordered softly.

Brynt turned up the volume control. Starbuck's voice echoed through the room, making the children's parents, who generally ignored the children's entertainment unit, look up startled.

"We're trapped!" the Starbuck bellowed.

"You've gotten us out of worse jams than this, Starbuck."

The Starbuck smiled grimly, sending Zossie's little heart beating faster.

"I sure have," the Starbuck said, "and this'll be no exception."

"Go to it, Starbuck," Chandra muttered.

"Yea, Starbuck," Zossie hollered.

"Mow 'em down, blast 'em, eat 'em alive," chanted Brynt.

Finally, Diova could stand the din no longer.

"Children, children, not so loud!"

Trinzot put his hands over his ears and tried to concentrate on his reading.

"Did you hear me, Brynt?" Diova hollered. "Turn that set down. You know how many times I've told you not to play

the Starbuck so loud. You'll all be deaf before you're old enough for processing."

"Ah, mother," Zossie whined.

"Zossie!" Diova said threateningly.

"Okay, okay," Zossie murmured. "Brynt, please."

With obvious reluctance, Brynt slowly lowered the volume until it reached a level that his mother clearly approved of. Diova nodded and returned to her housework.

The Starbuck continued to shoot down aliens with an almost reckless accuracy. It seemed every time he raised his laser pistol and got off a shot, an alien fell somewhere.

"That Starbuck never misses," Brynt whispered. It was a kind of stage whisper, performed for his mother, so that she would see he was trying to keep the noise-level down.

"That's why he's the Starbuck!" Chandra said, just as quietly.

"Right, Chandra," Zossie said. She was a bit loud and her siblings glanced at her reproachfully.

The children watched in fascination as the Starbuck mowed down any enemy who came close to him and the woman. Soon they escaped from the circling aliens and started running down the street. Brynt had to maneuver the controls frantically in order to keep up with the action. He had had much practice at image-controlling and was very good at it.

"Go to long shot, Brynt," Chandra suggested in her quietly authoritative way.

"No," Zossie protested, "stay on the Starbuck."

Chandra turned to her sister and said firmly, "We're missing the overview, Zossie. I want to get a good sense of the action."

Diova, who now stood next to Trinzot's chair, leaned down and whispered in his ear, "Chandra's got a real feel for the art of the Imagescan. She'll probably be a director."

"I agree," Trinzot replied, looking up and studying his daughter's intense eyes. "Brynt should hand over the controls to her."

"He can't. He's too jealous. No brother likes to be upstaged by his sister, you know that."

The Starbuck and his female sidekick had rushed into a building where aircraft were housed. Brynt punched the scene-change button and the interior of the building was shown from a high angle.

"Over there," the woman with the Starbuck shouted and pointed toward the other side of the chamber. "The *Gazelle*."

"What's the *Gazelle*?" Zossie asked. The other two children appeared irritated by her talking at just this point of the action.

"Don't you remember anything?" Brynt asked, disgustedly. "That's the special spaceship the evil one's invented to destroy the Gentle Federation."

"Oh," Zossie said. "Yeah."

"Come on, Denra!" the Starbuck yelled and sped toward the *Gazelle*. "That baby's our ticket off this blooming planet!"

When the Starbuck and Denra reached the *Gazelle*, they leaped onto its wing and into the cockpit. As the Starbuck was closing the cockpit canopy over them, Chandra shouted, "Bring up the cockpit, Brynt! C'mon, quick!"

"Hold on to your nose, Chandra. I'm doin' it, I'm doin' it."

"Brynt!" Diova said cautioningly. "Mind your tongue."

"Sorry, mother."

"That's all right, son. Just don't let the show get you all excited. You know what happens when your emotions overproduce."

Brynt's efficient working of the Imagescan controls had enlarged the Starbuck and Denra so much that their giant heads appeared to come out of the living room floor. The heads were each almost as tall as Zossie, who recoiled in momentary terror at their size. Her frightened reaction amused her siblings.

"Hold on to your seat, Denra!" the Starbuck said. "We're crashing outta here!"

"Long shot, Brynt," Chandra advised, "long shot."

Brynt's hands flew across the controls to give them a view of the *Gazelle* inside the building. The spacecraft zoomed forward, heading toward the nearest wall. As it came near the wall, the children held their breaths. The vehicle's crashing through the wall sent bricks flying in all directions. Zossie involuntarily ducked, and even Chandra and Brynt leaned back a bit.

Brynt now used the controls to create a view from the sky of the *Gazelle* clearing the building and heading upward. The long picturesque arc of its flight was interrupted by other spacecrafts attacking it. It blasted them out of the living room's skies, except for those that vanished through the living room ceiling. The *Gazelle* continued its upward flight and soon, with Brynt effectively managing the controls, the living room took on the look of the universe. A miniature universe, to be sure, but an impressive sight, so impressive that even Diova and Trinzot stopped what they were doing to regard it. The children cheered as the Starbuck's spacecraft headed toward the stars.

"The cockpit, Brynt, the cockpit," Chandra insisted.

Brynt made the universe disappear and again they had the giant view of the cockpit's interior, where the Starbuck

now turned and kissed the woman.

"Mush!" Zossie screamed disgustedly.

"Zossie, it's lovely," Chandra said.

"I say it's mush, mush it is."

A low buzzing sound spread through the room. All members of the family looked up suddenly, responsive to the Summoning. Trinzot dropped his scroll to the floor and stood up. Diova dropped her dustcloth and joined him.

"Children!" Trinzot said.

But they didn't have to be told. They were already standing, ready to proceed. The family, Diova and Trinzot walking in front, left the room. Behind them the Starbuck and Denra whispered excitedly to no listeners.

In the attractive tree-lined suburban street outside their home, the family encountered other families who were also responding to the Summoning. All of the people in the neighborhood formed a loose line, three or four abreast, and walked together at the same steady pace. They joined other families from other neighborhoods, each group blending easily and casually, like a joint night-out stroll, with the main body of citizens.

Their journey ended at a large building which looked like several domes flung into a pile and glued together. Inside were a multitude of small round rooms, each of which held four or five families. Trinzot and his family entered their room, which was on the eleventh tier and stood, as usual, in a position of at-ease, their eyes focused on the large image-bubble in front of them. Other families took up their own previously assigned positions.

When all families had proceeded to their places in the round rooms, the image-bubble in each room turned first a flickering beige, which was replaced with lavender waves, and finally by a speckled pattern of azure and scarlet.

Then the voice of the Summoner exploded the azure and scarlet pattern: "Fall!"

All of the people in all of the rooms immediately plummeted toward the floor, some of them hitting the metal surface, others landing on top of the first-fallen people. Zossie was nearly buried under her brother and a pair of men from neighborhood families. She could hardly breathe, but she did not stop smiling.

In the image-bubble, an Image Lord appeared. For an Image Lord, he was good-looking. To anyone not of his species, he would generally be considered a grotesque and monstrous individual. The skin of this Image Lord, and all the other Image Lords, was gray as bad weather and appeared to be peeling in large strips. It was not actually peeling. The strips were part of the skin's natural state, each hanging strip an outgrowth from the body. Some of the strips had sensory capacities. Since an Image Lord had no nasal apparatus, it received its odoriferous information through tiny pores in the hanging strips. They also conducted sound. An Image Lord was judged by other of his species by the amount and beauty of the hanging strips.

Anyone who despised a hirsute appearance would have been disgusted by this Image Lord. His head was particularly hairy and his coal-black eyes could barely be seen peeking out from their sockets low in the oval head. Its arms, four of them, were also extremely hairy. When they got damp with secretions, they gave off an odor that could stifle anyone but other Image Lords.

This Image Lord, the leader of the ceremonies, spread his several arms as if to take in the thousands of people watching him on many image-bubbles.

"First we will dance," the Image Lord said, "then we will sing, then we will beat each other with our fists. But first shout: 'We are yours, O Image Lords!' "

In all the round rooms, every inhabitant repeated his chant: "We are yours, O Image Lords!"

They repeated each of the Image Lord's next phrases.

"Suppliers of the good life. Bringer of food, shelter, and comfort. Glorifiers of dreams. Masters."

Satisfied with the responses, which came to him through several speakers in the bubblelike command chamber, a central room from which he directed activities, he elegantly waved one of his arms. In each room, the people got to their feet, bowed to each other, and started to dance. The dance was a graceful one. Even though there were several people in each room, they managed to slide and step past each other without collision. After the dancing came the singing. The songs were Image Lord songs and sounded odd when coming from less raspy, more attractive voices, for they were not smooth and attractive melodies. Still, all singers appeared to enjoy the musical interlude.

The dancing and singing had worked the inhabitants of the rooms into quite a frenzy when it came time for the fighting. At the Image Lord's signal, arms started swinging, heads started butting, teeth started biting. Zossie weaved in and around the people in the room, stepping on feet as hard as she could. Her father discovered her and delivered her a solid whack on the side of her head. Chandra dealt a mean elbow to the stomachs of several people, including both Brynt and Diova. Two or three people in that room were out cold by the time of the Image Lord's signal to desist.

After the final prayer and the implanting of particular suggestions in particular people, the meeting broke up. In several casual lines, the people left the multidomed building and returned to their homes. In the home of Trinzot and his family, they resumed their normal activities. He returned to his scroll-reading at the point where he'd left off, and Diova resumed house-cleaning. The Starbuck adventure had

ended while the children were gone. Brynt inserted a new adventure crystal into the control console and they settled down to view the new story. Immediately the Starbuck appeared, a woman on each arm as he swaggered across a landscape on whose craggy and forbidding surfaces were spread the corpses and other debris that marked the aftermath of a battle.

CHAPTER TWO

It seemed like an eternity since Lucifer had been off Baltar's base-star. Standing now on the spaceport dock on the planet Trillius, overseeing the ranks of human prisoners boarding the Cylon prison ship, his newly devised sensory cluster allowing him to feel the cold breeze coming in off the Trillian Ocean, he realized he would now feel contentment if he had only programmed that particular state into the cluster. He would think about doing just that.

Lucifer was continually reinventing himself. A cybernetic creation of the Cylon IL series, he had come off the line with more comprehension and insight than usually programmed into ambulatory computers. He had soon discovered that, using the resources available to him from the massive shipboard computers on a base-star, he could redesign himself. In the time since, he had enhanced his reservoir of knowledge, discovered new functions and abilities, given himself personality traits (including a few useful emotions) that had interested him in others, and had even provided himself with a soul which he secretly housed in his left shoulder.

His latest innovation had given him the freedom to leave the base-star and, especially, Baltar. Ever since the last setback to his ambitions, Baltar had become particularly morose. A human traitor who had sold out the twelve worlds and its inhabitants for protection and privileges that were never bestowed upon him, Baltar had much to be morose about. Lucifer often wondered how the man could live with himself and his deeds. However, the last incident, where a machine that dispensed emotions (also developed by Lucifer, although the devious Baltar had taken credit for it) had gone awry and very nearly driven the Imperious Leader of the Cylons insane, had discredited Baltar so severely that

there was a rumor traveling through channels that he was about to be stripped of command and replaced by a proper Cylon. Baltar had attempted to blame the emotion machine fiasco on Lucifer, but it was clear that nobody in power believed that explanation.

Baltar's gloom and the danger to Lucifer's own position if he stayed aboard until a replacement commander arrived had driven Lucifer to desperate action. He had transferred all vital computer information onto a set of crystals which he could transport with him, eliminating his dependence on the ship computer. He had further devised a computer retrieval and expansion-of-data unit which he could carry around with him wherever he went. When he needed particular information, he inserted the crystal containing that data into the unit. This flexibility allowed him to leave the ship. The moment he had realized he could be free of the ship and Baltar, he had tapped into the Cylon communication and commerce channels and located a job that would get him away from the base-star. He had applied for, and received, the assignment to transport a shipload of human prisoners to the famous, or infamous, Cylon prison colony. It was not the kind of job he had hoped for, but at least it would provide some deep-space distance between himself and Baltar.

When Lucifer told Baltar of the new assignment, the human had not shown the slightest interest. He had merely nodded and waved Lucifer away. That was the last Lucifer had seen of him: sitting on the high throne atop the command pedestal, his body slumped, his eyes vacant, his arms lying like dead animals in his lap.

As part of the job, Lucifer had brought the remaining prisoners from Baltar's base-star to this dock to be loaded with other prisoners of the Cylons onto the rickety tub which shuttled regularly between this seedy spaceport and the prison colony.

Watching the long string of prisoners pass by him, he realized that most of them would probably suffer terribly before dying soon at the hands of the passionately cruel Cylon jailers. Lucifer had programmed some compassion into his personality, and he felt a little regretful that he had to be the one to lead these wretches to their sad destinies, but he also realized that, wherever they were, the lives of these prisoners would be so wretched that, so long as the war endured, little could be done for them. He could not judge the right or wrong of the Cylon prison colony for himself. Cylons believed the disposal of human prisoners in any way was a blessing to them, to the Cylons, and to the universe as a whole. They were dedicated to the eradication of the human species.

As Lucifer watched the prisoners go by, he saw that many of them wore the insignia of Colonial Warrior. Whenever he saw that shoulder patch on the sleeve of a prisoner's tattered clothing, he was reminded of the one human he admired, Lieutenant Starbuck of the *Battlestar Galactica*. Starbuck was once a prisoner on Baltar's base-star, charming Lucifer with his brash confidence and easy humor, introducing him to the art of card-playing. He had beaten Lucifer soundly several times, even when it appeared Lucifer couldn't possibly lose. Ever since that time, Lucifer had been studying the possibilities inherent in card games, and felt he had learned enough to beat any human, particularly Starbuck, at them.

Sometimes, when he recalled his time with Starbuck, he wondered if he served the right side in this millennium-long war. When he looked at the dedicated but not particularly emotional, and certainly humorless Cylons, he wondered if it would be better to serve a race that contained Starbucks. Of course, he would prefer that it contain no more Baltars. He had had enough of Baltar, a human who seemed the direct

opposite of Starbuck—dishonest, charmless, and utterly lacking in any reasonable sort of humor.

The worst part of this vacation from Baltar was that, at the end of it, Lucifer would have to return to the base-star. While he could wrangle a temporary mission like the prison one, obtaining a full transfer was much more difficult. The Cylon High Command did not look fondly on requests for transfer, considering them admissions of failure in present assignments. Lucifer knew he must seek a loophole through which he could squirm without losing face. He was certain he could find a way and hoped the prison mission would offer some kind of opportunity for him.

His meditation on these subjects, a meditation that took place in an instant since Lucifer didn't need to assemble his thoughts in a logical order, was ended when he heard the telltale creaks of another walking computer in the IL series gliding up behind him. He even knew who his new companion would be, from the pitch of the squeaks in the rollers at the bottom of his legs. It was not a companion whose company he relished.

"Spectre!" Lucifer said. "What brings you here?"

Spectre was an elegantly dressed near-duplicate of Lucifer, except that his head came to a more curved bulblike point, his robe was blue instead of the rich red velvet of Lucifer's garment, and he was somewhat shorter in stature than the towering Lucifer.

"A diplomatic mission," Spectre said in his usual soft voice. "From Imperious Leader," he added, clearly wanting the words to have full impact on Lucifer. Spectre had recently risen to the rank of aide to the supreme leader of the Cylons, and he never missed a chance to allude proudly to his position in conversation, especially to Lucifer who, though a superior example of the IL series, played a lesser role in the Cylon hierarchy. Not long ago, Spectre had been merely a

scavenger in charge of a seedy Cylon outpost. He had first cultivated Baltar, then moved on to Imperious Leader.

"I am to travel to the prison colony," Spectre explained, "with this . . . this disgusting lot. I would not travel with humans ordinarily. They are grotesque, aren't they? Just look at them. Who would ever want to deal with them? And, Lucifer, why are you here?"

Lucifer perceived that Spectre's remarks were calculated, as usual. Spectre already knew that Lucifer was in charge of the humans, and wanted to emphasize his own rank among the Cylons.

"I am in charge of the prisoners," Lucifer admitted.

"Oh," Spectre said. His next observation was typically Spectrian: "I suppose we all must do the jobs assigned us."

While he was reluctant to admit the truth, Lucifer felt he might as well be honest with this supercilious collection of spare parts.

"I chose the duty. A little change of scenery."

"Well, yes," Spectre said. "A vacation on the prison colony. I was not aware of its recreational facilities."

"I do not know that it has any."

"Oh."

Spectre had been in the command chamber when Imperious Leader had gone berserk due to Baltar's ignorant fiddling with Lucifer's guilt machine. While Baltar had convinced Spectre that the invention was Baltar's own, Lucifer believed that Spectre really knew that Lucifer had created it. Somehow that gave him the upper hand in the present encounter.

"We will have to spend every available moment together on this trip, Lucifer. Exchange our knowledge, and get to know each other better. I could perhaps be of aid to you."

As Spectre rolled away, Lucifer wondered if there were any way he could avoid Spectre's company aboard the ship.

In the prison holds of the ship, Lucifer supervised the incarceration of the prisoners. Long lines of them snaked from the entrance hatchway through the open central area and into various cell blocks. Lucifer stood on a landing above the prisoners and watched them go by. A few of them, from Baltar's base-star, spotted him there and muttered in a surly fashion as they passed by. With his sensory circuits at optimum, Lucifer could hear even the quietest complaint.

"There's that garbage bag of bolts and wires," one prisoner mumbled. "I'd like to get him in my—"

"After what he did to us, drowning him in a vat of acid would be too good, if you ask me," another said.

Lucifer recognized them as prisoners who had been tortured severely. They had been among those most affected by the emotion machine when it was given its grand test in Baltar's command chamber, a test in which a few had been driven crazy.

"Yeah," a short lean prisoner remarked, "I'd like to see that metal face o' his slowly rust out into ragged pieces."

Toward the end of the line of prisoners from Baltar's base-star was a former *Galactica* fighter pilot named Scarn. Known for being feisty and independent, he had been broken by the sophisticated and cruel Cylon torture techniques. Now, seeing Lucifer standing on the landing ahead of him, he recognized him as the infernal creation who sometimes presided over the torture sessions on the base-star. Enraged, he started growling in the back of his throat. Since such strange behavior was common among the humans, the Cylon guards, intent on getting the prisoners to their proper quarters, paid no attention to it.

As Scarn neared the platform on which Lucifer stood, he examined its structure. A ladder led upward on the left side of the landing. Scarn was willing to risk suicide in order to get his hands on Lucifer.

Breaking suddenly from the ranks, he threw himself up the ladder and flung himself at Lucifer, who, unprepared for such an assault, fell backward, slamming against the metal railing of the landing with great force. The fall jarred something in him, and above him he saw hundreds of Scarns whirling in a great circle, all of them growling and hurling epithets at him. Scarn's voice was replaced by a loud crashing noise, and the many Scarns disappeared from Lucifer's vision. In their place, hundreds of Spectres rotated in a wide circle. The Spectres became larger, seeming to descend toward him, and he sensed an adjustment being made to his central vision circuits. The hundred Spectres diminished to one, a single annoying vision of Spectre gazing down at the prone Lucifer.

"You were lucky I came by to observe your incarceration of the prisoners," Spectre said. "Your guards might not have pulled that human vermin off you in time. There are no repair facilities aboard this ship, at least not for us. So we would have had to put you in storage and waited to transport you to a proper adjustment center."

"What happened?" Lucifer asked.

"I thought it was clear. One of the prisoners attacked you."

"I realize that. What happened after that?"

"I shot him. The shot knocked him sprawling against that wall over there."

Lucifer looked in the direction which Spectre's skeletonlike metal finger pointed. Scarn was indeed lying at the foot of a wall. Two Cylon guards hauled him to his feet. Lucifer saw that he was unconscious, but still alive.

"Spectre, we are not supposed to attack. It is in our programming. We may only shoot weapons in defense."

"I was defending you, keeping you from certain disaster."

There was a peculiar bright red glow emanating from Spectre's eyes. Was it possible this cybernetic creation was gloating?

"Defending me is not part of our combat programming. You may shoot only if you are threatened. You were not threatened in this situation."

"Imperious Leader has chosen to endow me with special discretionary powers that have bypassed certain stabilization circuits. I may even attack, should I choose. An improvement over our overcautious programming, don't you think?"

"I am not certain. I think we serve our masters better by not being programmed for violent acts."

"Sometimes violence is the only proper response, Lucifer. At any rate, you should be thanking me for saving you from . . . inconvenience."

Lucifer disapproved of most of what Spectre said. Violence from one of his own series was unacceptable to him. But, since Spectre was right in the matter of saving him, Lucifer chose not to exhibit his displeasure.

"So noted, Spectre. I appreciate your quick action. Is the human dead?"

"No. As it happened my pistol was set on stun. I would have realigned the setting, however, if the human had placed you in further danger. In such a situation I am allowed to kill."

Lucifer felt uneasy about this new information. The killing power made Spectre extremely dangerous. He would have to be watched carefully during this trip.

Lucifer wondered if he should program himself for the ability to kill. It would be quite easy to do. The important question, however, was should he, like Spectre, have the power to kill, or even shoot?

"Can you stand?" Spectre asked.

"Of course I can. All I needed after the attack was the adjustment you made to my vision circuitry."

"Let me help you up."

"I can manage myself."

His legs were so twisted under him that his attempt to rise was comically unsuccessful. Spectre leaned down, gripped his arms securely, and pulled him to his feet. Although he was glad to regain his equilibrium, he resented each of Spectre's helping gestures. If he did not put this disgrace to the IL series in his place, this was going to be a rocky trip. A rocky trip indeed.

Drawing from the prison ship's computer banks, Lucifer examined the projected itinerary of the trip. Like most Cylon itineraries, this one was inefficient and overloaded with detail. Lucifer could, if given command of the ship, get it to the colony much sooner and with less decay of fuel in the central core. But it would do him no good to go to the ship's command triumvirate and give them his findings. In one respect, humans and Cylons were alike—they got stubborn when you tried to advise them of a better plan.

Instead of pondering the efficiency of his insights, he practiced his new bypassing technique. He no longer had to enter data into the computer to see it appear on the screen. There was no need to press buttons or manipulate a keyboard. He could merely think of the information he wanted to consider and it would appear instantly on the monitor screen. The telepathic bypass allowed him to work

faster, without the slow and bothersome intervening functions.

There was a tinny knocking on his cabin door. The tinniness of the sound told him it was Spectre's metal hands rapping on the door. Although he wanted to tell him to go away, he called out, "Enter!"

Spectre eased into the room. Lucifer noted, with distaste, that Spectre had changed his outfit. His new clothing was, if possible, more garish than the old. It was a robe in alternating peach and scarlet colors. There was a velvet ruff, also scarlet, around its collar. Lucifer wondered why Spectre dressed so ostentatiously. Beings like himself and Spectre should do everything possible not to attract attention. Was there some sly purpose to the social-climbing Spectre's attire, or was he trying to taunt Lucifer in some way?

"Greetings in Cylon splendor, Lucifer." This was a Cylon ritual, used generally on ceremonial occasions. With Spectre saying it, it sounded as outrageous as his outfit. "I thought we might benefit mutually from the exchange of our latest theories and observations."

For once Lucifer replied directly, without adopting the kind of ridiculous social etiquette so loved by Spectre.

"Why do you say that? It appears to me that you gain nothing from a conference with me. You are exactly where you aspire to be, Spectre."

While Spectre did not react to Lucifer's blunt remarks, Lucifer sensed, by the way Spectre pulled at the skirt of his robe, that he was annoyed. The criticism seemed to hang in the air. Spectre, after all, was intelligent and perceptive in spite of his obsequiousness. Still, in any situation, he acknowledged only what he chose to acknowledge, so he continued in a blithe manner.

"With superior creations like us, Lucifer, there is always something each can learn from the other. We could interlock

our circuitry or, like Cylons and humans, merely chat."

Lucifer was disgusted at the idea of connecting up with Spectre. Although interlock was a legitimate method for cybernetic beings to exchange information, linking with Spectre seemed, to Lucifer, vaguely obscene. He wondered if, in his affection for his human enemies, he had begun to adopt their harrowing restrictive moral sense.

"Proceed, Spectre."

Spectre glided a short space closer before saying, "You don't, as the Cylons do, consider the humans vermin, do you, Lucifer?"

Lucifer, since he had just been thinking of his affection for the humans, was disconcerted. Had his cybernetic companion discovered mind-reading?

"Why do you say that?" Lucifer said.

Spectre began to slide back and forth, a kind of robotic pacing.

"I have been told that you often intercede for them, that you have been responsible for improving their conditions aboard Baltar's base-star and here on this ship."

"You saw today, Spectre. One of them attacked me, most of them hate me. Does that sound as if I am kind to them?"

"I did not say they were grateful. They are stubborn, these humans. An almost admirable trait, one I could credit them with, if I didn't find them so repulsive to regard."

"Some of their ideas are quite—"

Lucifer didn't get to finish his thought as the cabin was suddenly rocked by a massive explosion coming from another part of the ship. He was nearly knocked off his chair. Before he could regain his equilibrium, two more explosions vibrated the cabin walls. Spectre slid sideways, then tipped over and fell. Lucifer, with effort, stood up and managed to

keep his balance in spite of the way the cabin seemed to rock on a fulcrum.

"What is happening?" Spectre said from his position on the floor. "What are those sounds?"

"I would hypothesize they are the sounds of explosions caused by contact with the ship's hull by assault devices. I believe we are under attack."

Spectre managed to right himself when another explosion nearly knocked him back to the floor.

"Interesting," Spectre said. "Shall we investigate?"

"Hiding might be the wiser choice."

"Perhaps. But less edifying."

Lucifer noted that his computer screen had gone blank. The lighting in the room began to fade in and out. He followed Spectre out to the corridor where they found more flickering light and traces of smoke in the air. They proceeded down the corridor. Lucifer wondered why it was so empty, then a Cylon crewman, missing an arm and exuding green liquid, stumbled into the corridor. After whirling around, he fell dead at their feet.

The sounds of attack became louder. Strong odors registered on Lucifer's sensory circuits. Another crewman rushed into the corridor. Lucifer stopped him before he could run past.

"What is happening?" Lucifer asked.

"We're under attack," the crewman said. "By pirates."

Pulling away from Lucifer's grasp, the crewman continued on whatever errand he was pursuing.

"Pirates?" Lucifer said aloud.

"I have nothing recorded of pirates in this sector," Spectre announced. "There is little piracy anywhere that I am aware of."

The creature that now leaped into Lucifer's view was perceived by him as ill-formed and ugly. It was huge, with gray peeling skin, a hairy face whose dominant feature was strong black eyes that were placed where mouths were in most intelligent species, and thick hairy arms, four of them, gesturing threateningly. It seemed to have a weapon at the end of each arm.

"Well, bubble my biceps," the alien shouted. "What have we here? A pair of metalskulls, I do believe. The consortium will be pleased. Very pleased."

The alien clearly spoke in no language Lucifer had heard before, yet he was able to understand it. As he heard each strange gurgling sound, words he knew formed in his mind. His guess for the instant translation centered on the elaborate beltlike panel of instruments that hung loosely from the alien's waist. There was probably a language-translator among those instruments.

"What do you mean?" Lucifer asked.

"This ship is now under our command. We're taking the load of humans back to our planet. And, as a bonus, you two. You will be of special interest to the consortium."

"That is impossible!" Spectre said. He had added an authoritative sound to his voice. "I am a representative of his elegance, the Imperious Leader of the Cylons."

"The Cylons? You represent the Cylons?" The alien seemed impressed.

Spectre increased the imperial tone of his voice. "Yes," he said. "I am a special envoy to—"

"I despise Cylons," the alien growled. "They are worthless to us. We leave all Cylons behind. All *surviving* Cylons. Mayhaps I shall just destroy you, reduce you to the scrap pile. You can meet your maker in your junkyard heaven."

"No, no," Spectre protested, his voice weaker. He had switched to his normal tone, obsequiousness. "Exalted sir, I am merely a functionary of the Cylons. I can be of value to you."

So like Spectre, Lucifer thought, to adopt the values of the closest source of power.

"I believe you can be of some help, mate," the alien said. "I shall spare you."

"I thank you, sir."

"Come on then, both of ya. We're assembling prisoners on the bridge before departing this vessel."

"May I ask," Lucifer interjected, "where we are going?"

"Why, to our home. A planet that would be called, in your language, The Joyful Land."

"What a euphonious name!" Spectre gushed.

"You will love it there," the alien said. "Especially if the consortium finds use for you."

"May I ask you," Lucifer said, "what kind of use?"

"You've an inquisitive soul, haven't you, ironhead?"

Lucifer was quite taken back. How could this crude alien creature know about his soul? No one anywhere knew about his soul. Even now, he could sense it stirring in his left shoulder.

"I can't say what use you'll be put to, lad," the alien said. "My people have a special talent for . . . for finding uses for the beings we capture. You will see soon enough."

"I can hardly wait, exalted sir," Spectre said.

The alien leaned down to where he expected Lucifer's ear would be. Lucifer did not feel it necessary to tell him that his sensory apparatus was located in his lower chest.

"Your friend here," the alien whispered, "has the gift of gab, I see. Has he been programmed in the art of buttering

up?"

Lucifer was impressed with the alien's perception, but he had to remain loyal to his series, so he replied, "I cannot say."

He wondered why he should even maintain loyalty to Spectre, who shifted allegiance as easily as he used oily phrases. Spectre had moved away from Lucifer, as if to say, we are alike but we don't belong together. Lucifer didn't mind. He would accept Spectre's disdain cheerfully.

As they were herded forward by the alien, who now sang a tune in his harsh guttural language, Lucifer wondered what kind of trap they had fallen into. Would it be worse than serving under Baltar? It might be. What really annoyed him, however, was that if he was on his way to a living hell, why did he have to go there with Spectre?

CHAPTER THREE

On the *Battlestar Galactica*, Lieutenant Starbuck was also dealing with an enemy in one of the ship's corridors. If the children from The Joyful Land had seen the real Starbuck in his present plight, they would have been disappointed. He didn't look like the mythological hero they so adored. There was terror in his eyes. Sweat dotted his face. The leaves of the cigar he held tight between his teeth were loosening from the drool coming out of his mouth. His straw-colored hair was disheveled from all the worried passes he'd made at it with his hand.

Forgetting to look where he was going, he rounded a turn and ran smack into Captain Apollo. Both of *Galactica's* bravest heroes nearly fell onto their heroic backsides. Starbuck's cigar, now split in half, fell to the floor. Starbuck picked it up, staring at it as if it were an old friend who'd died. Recovering his balance first, Apollo steadied Starbuck.

"Hey, hey," he said, "what's going on, good buddy?"

"Nothing," Starbuck mumbled. He fidgeted in Apollo's grasp.

"Don't tell me nothing. I can tell when something's bugging you."

"I—I've got to get to the Officer's Club lounge right away. I left a glass of sparkling Ambrosa there. You know how terrible that tastes when it loses its fizz."

Starbuck tried to push past him, but Apollo, edging him back against the corridor wall, restrained him.

"No flyby here," Apollo cautioned. "I'm your pal. Tell me."

Starbuck seemed annoyed at his friend's prodding. He pushed a lock of hair away from his forehead. His clear blue eyes began to cloud with fear. He didn't want to admit

anything to Apollo. But they had been friends a long time . . .

"Okay, okay," Starbuck said. He relaxed and leaned back against the wall. "But don't laugh at me. Promise you won't laugh."

"I would, but this sounds like it's worth a laugh. Just tell me."

Starbuck, uncharacteristically reluctant, had difficulty getting his words out. "It's . . . it's . . . well, it's this . . . this new cadet. The one from Vaile."

"Which one? The Vaileans have contributed several trainees to our ranks. Good fighters they are, too."

Vaile had been the last civilized planet the *Galactica* had stopped at to fuel and load supplies. The Vaileans had been unusually cooperative, desiring to help any enemy of the Cylons. They'd nearly been paid for their help by annihilation at the hands of an assault task force from Baltar's base-star but fortunately had been rescued by some skillful combat from a squadron of *Galactica*'s pilots, led by Commander Adama's daughter Athena. As a result of the incident, several Vaileans had been stirred to join the fleet, with most of them requesting combat assignments. Some of the best cadets Apollo had ever taught were in this batch from Vaile.

"Who is it, Starbuck?"

"Well . . . well, you know the one named Hera?"

Apollo tried to place the name with a person.

"Hera, Hera. No, I can't say—unless, wait, is she the tiny blond corker, the one with—"

"No, not that one. I wish it were that one. She's not given me a tumble and I've—well, anyway, not that one. Hera's hardly tiny. And not blond. Dark, flowing raven hair. Hair like the dark places in the devil's pit, eyes that match."

Apollo laughed. He now knew the woman Starbuck meant.

"The tall one?"

"The tall one."

"What about her?"

"She's got her sights set for me."

"So what else is new, buddy? She's quite a looker, Starbuck. And not bad in the figure department either. I mean, there're quite a few skypilots around here who do extremely well with her in their dreams."

"And *only* in their dreams. She's not interested in any of them. She's rejected approaches like a Viper mowing down Cylons."

"Except for you."

Starbuck's eyes widened in sudden anger.

"No! Not *except* for me. I made no pass at her. I didn't even give her a warm look in training class."

Apollo tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"Hey, what's happened to the legend here? I thought no beautiful woman was safe around you."

"Maybe, maybe not. Hera's beautiful, all right, can't argue with that. But she's too much woman for me. No, stop laughing, Apollo, I mean it. She's at least two inches taller than me."

"So what? Much more to love, as they say."

"Heck, Apollo, you know me. Quality, not quantity. All I know is, I don't feel comfortable with Cadet Hera."

Apollo shrugged.

"I don't see the problem, frankly. You, my good friend, are the expert at manipulating the affections of several women at a time. How can you have trouble with just one?"

"It's not trouble. I'm just, well, trying to avoid her until she gets me out of her system. I—"

The subject of their discussion came around a corner. Her face lit up with delight as she spotted Starbuck.

"Lieutenant! I've been looking for you."

"See?" Starbuck whispered to Apollo.

Apollo, amused by his friend's dilemma, took a good look at the cadet as she approached them. She had a terrific walk, he could say that. She walked like a woman comfortable with her sexiness, easy, confident steps that blended rhythmically with the attractive sway of her upper body. Starbuck was right about one thing: she was indeed tall. Tall and slim, and with a face that was both strong and lovely. Like all the Vaileans, high cheekbones gave her face a sculptured quality that, together with her firm mouth, slightly aquiline strong nose, and a healthy and robust complexion, made her one of the most beautiful women aboard the *Galactica*. Her black hair flowed loosely and bounced gently as she came up to them. As she pushed locks of hair away from her face in a backhanded gesture that Apollo found impossibly sexy, he wondered for a moment if he should volunteer to take Hera off Starbuck's hands. With a woman this beautiful, why should the fact that she towered over him by a couple of inches be a problem?

"Lieutenant," Hera said in a husky voice, "we didn't finish discussing emergency evasive tactics."

"I was just giving you a graphic demonstration."

"What, I don't—"

"I evaded you, didn't I, Cadet?"

The moment became tense as Hera stared piercingly at Starbuck, catching the irony of his remark, but not sure what it implied. Apollo decided to break the tension.

"Are you going to introduce me to this lovely trainee, Starbuck?"

Hera turned on him, her eyes angry.

"I do not like to be called lovely," Hera said firmly. "Compliments from pilots are generally devious, I have found."

Apollo nodded.

"Sorry, Cadet. I meant nothing by the word. I was being factually descriptive, not devious."

Hera searched Apollo's opaque blue eyes for irony, but realized he was being sincere.

"I think you're telling the truth, Captain. Many men aren't when they offer compliments. Particularly on the *Galactica*, I have noticed."

"Whoa there!" Starbuck said. "I never complimented you once, Cadet Hera, except for your skill in class."

"I'm aware of that, Lieutenant. And I appreciate it. That's why I'm so attracted to you. You're not like other men."

Apollo could barely control his laughter. Imagine, he thought, Starbuck being praised for not being like other men, especially when it came to women. Unless his friend swore him to silence, this would be wonderful material for teasing Starbuck in the lounge.

The Intercom Circuit clicked on with the usual three-beep warning that an important message was about to be broadcast. The two pilots and the cadet glanced toward the speaker and waited tensely. Whenever those three beeps were heard, it could mean anything from a routine summons to the beginning of battle orders. This time it was a summons, as they heard Colonel Tigh's voice, a bit muffled by decays in the system, saying: "Captain Apollo, your presence is required on the bridge. On the double, please!"

As Tigh repeated the message, Apollo said, "Got to go. Pleased to meet you, Cadet Hera."

"We did not actually meet, not formally."

"Another time, then. Soon, I hope."

As Apollo started to walk away, Starbuck called after him, "Wait. That sounds like an emergency. I'll go with you."

Seeing that his friend was just looking for an excuse to get away from the attractive cadet, Apollo decided to leave him on the hook. All over the ship, people had been victims of Starbuck's pranks. To be "starbucked" was a phrase that had been part of the *Galactica's* lingo for ages. It was time to starbuck Starbuck for once.

"Not necessary, Lieutenant. The message was for me."

Apollo strode away quickly in order to keep Starbuck from arguing him into anything. Some buddy, Starbuck thought, couldn't he see I'm trying to get away from this infernal female? Next time he needs help from me, he'll get felgercarb. He slipped a new cigar from his upper-arm zipper pocket and put it, unlit, in his mouth. He would think about lighting it later. He was trying to cut down and actually smoked only when he absolutely needed it.

Hera planted herself directly in front of Starbuck, who was more than usually conscious of her height.

"A charming man, Apollo, I think," she said.

"Yeah," Starbuck muttered. "He is. Charming. Very charming." Then he saw a new strategy. His voice became smooth and persuasive, the kind of tone he employed regularly in a con job. "Say, Hera, you know, you and he, with all your positive qualities, might make quite a team. Romantically, I mean. Give it some thought, Cadet. And you can rely on me to make it happen. I'm quite the matchmaker, especially when it comes to a good buddy and a . . . good woman."

Hera smiled, showing uneven but gleaming teeth. She spoke softly, "I envy the lover who wins the captain's heart, Lieutenant. But it will not be me, I'm sure. Now, Lieutenant Starbuck, I must tell you: We Vaileans are direct. A hard life in a wilderness planet doesn't allow time for clever strategies. I wish to tell you that I am extremely fond of you, Starbuck."

Showily rubbing his chin in mock surprise, Starbuck's reply was spoken in his most boyish manner. "What? Really? Gee, look, Cadet, you've really got the wrong take on me. I'm not like you think I am."

"I'm aware of your reputation as a skirt-chaser, Starbuck. I am also aware of your record of conquests, and the way it has marked you on this ship. The women, it seems, can't get through a normal conversation without mentioning your name."

Starbuck felt his heart beat faster at Hera's information.

"Is that right?" he said eagerly. "Really? My, I didn't realize that. It's . . . very flattering."

Hera sighed. "I suppose. If you believe in flattery. I don't."

"Well, I'm sure they *exaggerate* the—"

"I think not. I believe you are every bit the romantic rogue they say you are. But that doesn't concern me. All I know is that ever since I came aboard the *Galactica* and saw you for the first time, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. On Vaile we have a saying: 'To rid your mind of something that is bothering you, you must confront the source of it.' You are that source. I wish to be your woman, Lieutenant."

Starbuck tried to control his anger. She wasn't supposed to proposition him. That was his job. He hadn't been sure he wanted to make a pass at Hera; now he knew he didn't want to. It would be redundant, anyway.

"Hey, hey, wait a centon," he said, backing away from her. "You just don't go up to somebody and announce that sort of thing with—with—"

"Honesty?" she said, and let the word hang for a moment before going on. "Is honesty not a good trait with you?"

Again, Starbuck was flustered by the directness of the woman, and again it brought out his pose of boyish charm.

"Well, no. Heck no, I'm honest, too. Known for it."

Hera's smile was sardonic. "Quite the opposite. Everyone says if a person believes everything that you say, then that person is well on the way to being starbucked."

It seemed Hera was determined to convey to him the praise of others.

"Gee, they say that, do they? I didn't know. I feel kind of —"

"Enough of your tricks, Starbuck. I only want you, and no fuss."

She reached out for him, and he jumped out of her grasp.

"Hey, wait!"

Her second try brought him into her arms. In a graceful and smooth gesture, she removed the unlit cigar from his mouth and flipped it away. Her embrace was firm as she kissed him. At first he tried to resist the kiss, then he realized that he was enjoying it and he relaxed. He was, however, somewhat disconcerted by his awareness that his head was turned up toward hers as she bent down slightly for the kiss.

Hera's skill at kissing was overwhelming. He was disappointed when their lips separated. Suddenly he heard footsteps coming toward them. Whirling around, he saw Cassiopeia, the gorgeous blond med-tech who had recently been his one and only romantic interest. She was smiling. He couldn't tell whether the smile was friendly or malicious.

What had she seen? How could she have missed anything? He slipped out of Hera's embrace, his face reddening.

"Some children never give up their hobbies," Cassiopeia said. She seemed amused.

"Cassiopeia!" was all Starbuck could think of to say.

"That's my name. Nice of you to remember it."

"Cassie, I—"

"I told you to stop calling me Cassie."

Hera stepped forward.

"Who is this?" she said, nodding toward the blonde.

Cassiopeia grinned at her and said, "I was once the great love of his life. I think number forty-two in the series of Great Loves of Starbuck's Life. Perhaps you're the next."

Hera seemed affronted.

"Positively not. I seek no rating or ranking. I have no wish for a lasting romance with the lieutenant."

"Oh?" Starbuck said, disturbed, not knowing whether or not he had just been insulted.

"On Vaile we do not love until each partner in the relationship has satisfied the other that he or she will be devoted for the rest of both their lives. There is no other possibility, and punishment is severe for anyone who breaks the vows of wedlock. As a result, there are very few marriages on Vaile—"

"I'll bet," Starbuck commented.

"Starbuck!" Cassiopeia said, annoyed at the flippancy.

"The marriages that do result," Hera continued, "are almost always happy, particularly since we're allowed complete freedom in our unmarried days to choose partners for flings. I enjoy flings. And I wish to have one with you, Starbuck, simple as that."

"Wow, Starbuck!" Cassiopeia exclaimed. "Simple as that, Starbuck. What an offer! Right up your launch corridor."

Starbuck felt under siege from both sides.

"Hey, Cass, you don't think I—"

"It doesn't matter to me what you do, bucko," Cassiopeia said testily. "You're free to pursue any . . . hobby."

"And what about you? What if I—"

"Win some, lose some, Starbuck. See you."

Cassiopeia briskly walked away. Starbuck took two steps after her, but Hera, grabbing his arm, pulled him back.

"Hey, easy on the threads."

"How about it, Starbuck?"

"About what?"

"Our fling."

"There won't be any fling."

Hera hit a metal wall panel roughly.

"Because I ask? Is that it? If you asked, it would be all right?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's it, isn't it? I can read you like a scanner screen, Lieutenant. All men are wild-daggits when it comes to romance. You're no different."

"Don't put words in my mouth, Cadet."

Hera appeared ready to explode, but she calmed herself quickly.

"Well, it doesn't matter," she said. "I want you, Starbuck. I'll have you." She proceeded down the corridor in the same direction Cassiopeia had taken.

Starbuck called after her, "Don't be too sure of that, Cadet Hera."

"I'll have you, Starbuck," she said ominously. Her words reverberated through the corridor.

Apollo knew something was up as soon as he set foot on the bridge. His father was pacing and taking quick sidelong glances at the massive starfield, on which presently could be seen, against the backdrop of multitudinous stars, the ragtag fleet—the common slang for the hundreds of ships that formed Adama's questing caravan—trailing the *Galactica* in orderly fashion. Their even lines were a credit to his father's leadership. There were so many and diverse kinds of ships, not all of which were up to par in the engineering and maintenance departments, that it was unusual there were so few breakdowns in formation and, at least recently, so few stragglers.

Colonel Tigh, his face troubled as he studied his commander, brightened up when he realized Captain Apollo had arrived. Adama, too, looked less anxious after Tigh had informed him of his son's presence on the bridge.

"Ah, Apollo," he said. "Sorry to interrupt your recreation period."

"I'd finished, sir. Even did the full exercise program."

"Good." Adama gestured toward Tigh to join them. "It seems we have a crisis, Apollo. Tigh?"

"It's been reported that there's been a mutiny aboard the investigatory science ship, the *Eureka*."

Apollo, as Adama had expected, was astonished.

"The *Eureka*?! Why, that's one of the last ships I'd expect to—"

"My thinking exactly," Tigh said. "It's not likely the crew there would mutiny. And certainly the scientists are above that sort of thing. We need fuller information before proceeding on this matter."

"Captain," Adama said, "I want you to take a team and shuttle to the *Eureka* under a flag of truce. Find out what in Kobol is going on over there! The one cryptic message we have from them indicates they plan to separate the ship from the fleet."

"We can't allow that," Apollo said. "Even if the fleet could afford to lose any more ships, it's too dangerous for an individual vessel to go on alone. They'd just be sitting ducks for a Cylon attack squadron."

"Precisely why we need to find out more," Tigh said. "The shuttle is being readied. Choose anyone to accompany you."

Apollo thought over the matter of the team for a moment, then said, "No need for a large group. I'll take two people with me. I suggest Sheba. She has the experience of dealing with insurrections. And I'd like to take Croft along. He's itching for some real action, I hear."

"Croft?" Adama said, not sure if he had heard right. "I thought you two didn't get along."

"We don't. But mutinies are tricky matters and Croft, well —"

"Croft has a tricky mind," Adama remarked. "Good thinking, Apollo. And it just happens that Croft is presently aboard the *Galactica*."

"I know. That helped me to think of him. We've had a run-in already."

Apollo had been sipping an unusually flat and tasteless glass of grog. He'd noticed Croft sitting alone and had nodded to him when he arrived in the lounge. Croft had shown no response. Apollo had shrugged it off, but had been surprised when the man suddenly appeared next to his table, staring down at him through narrowed critical eyes. As always when encountering Croft, Apollo was amazed at the

extreme leatheriness of the man's skin. It looked too tough to be porous, too dry to have any blood flowing beneath it.

"Captain Apollo!" Croft said, some nastiness in his voice. "Still among the privileged, I see."

"Something bothering you, Croft?" Apollo asked.

Croft sat down and leaned toward Apollo. He held a glass of Ambrosa in his hand, but didn't seem interested in it.

"A lot, including that you get yourself on all the important missions while I've got to do garbage duty as grid barge commander. A peculiar little revenge your father played upon me."

"Croft, you know it wasn't revenge. You were assigned to head up the prison ship because you already knew it so well. And Commander Adama has often mentioned the humane and fair measures you've initiated to improve the state of the prisoners. He regards your work highly. Rehab rate figures are sensational. Many have been freed to perform useful—"

"Can it, Captain. I have no fair and humane measures. I just talk sense to a few of my old comrades. I'm no reformer. Give a prisoner enough to make him feel human, plus three squares a day and credit for his achievements, and you can make any bozo useful. But you forget, I wasn't always a grid rat. I was a commander, a specialist, not a bureaucrat."

Both were silent for a while, remembering their uneasy alliance, so long ago now. Croft had been imprisoned for thievery and smuggling; however, since in the law-abiding part of his life he had commanded a division on an ice planet, he was peculiarly suited for a special mission. The flight of the *Galactica* and the ragtag fleet had been threatened by a massive laser cannon located on an ice planet named Tairac. Croft and his team of convicts had been joined by Apollo, Starbuck, and Boomer in an assault upon the mountain on whose peak the cannon rested. With

the aid of a strange race of clones, they had successfully taken out the big gun, although Croft had lost the woman he loved in the subsequent battle. In fact, he was the only survivor of the prison squad. His heroism had won him his freedom, restoration of rank, and the return to the prison barge as its commander.

Apollo wondered if perhaps Croft *was* wasted on the grid barge. He vowed to talk to his father about the matter. Croft was too old to regain Viper pilot status, but perhaps there were other more vital duties available than helming a prison ship, especially now that, due to his efforts, it was running so efficiently that a subordinate could take it over.

"You're allowed to go through channels," Apollo suggested to him, "petition the commander for a different assignment."

Croft laughed mockingly.

"Sure, and Commander Adama'll give me any old job I want."

"I didn't say that."

"Of course you didn't. You know how privilege works, being one of the most privileged beings aboard this rattletrap. Commander's son, ace Viper pilot. Goes together, don't it?"

"Croft, you're overstepping—"

"Don't lecture to me. I was blasting Cylons to fragments when you were still in your diapers, kiddo."

"And robbing your own side at the same time."

That got Croft's goat. He stood up, obviously angry, clearly considering a challenge to Apollo. Looking around, he saw that Boomer and several other Viper pilots were watching him guardedly. Ever shrewd, he relaxed and smiled at Apollo.

"I've been officially pardoned for that, Captain."

Apollo nodded. Croft was right to admonish him.

"You're right," he said. "I apologize. I was wrong to bring that up."

Croft peered at him with those mysterious shaded eyes, then said, "Sorry, Apollo. I'm kinda bitter about the way things've worked out. You fought bravely and well, back at Tairac. But still, you can't tell me that being the commander's son hasn't given you a step up from time to time."

Croft certainly hadn't lost his talent for being irritating. Apollo resisted standing up and challenging the man.

"I'm not going to be drawn into an argument with you, Croft."

"No. Protect yourself, Captain."

Croft slammed his glass down on the table. Apollo realized he hadn't drunk from it at all. Turning on his heel, Croft strode arrogantly out of the Officer's lounge.

Apollo couldn't get Croft's criticisms out of his head. Were they true? Did he reap the benefits of privilege? Would he have been in some lowly position aboard the *Galactica* if his father had not been in charge? He had earned his rank, he was certain of that. He had performed above the standard in battle after battle. He had saved fellow pilots from disaster with his combat and flying skills. His plans and strategies had gotten the *Galactica* out of many jams already. Everyone appeared to respect him for his achievements, and not because he was the commander's son. Everyone apparently but Croft.

"What was the run-in about, Captain?" Adama was asking. Apollo didn't want to bring up the subject of command favoritism, not with the commander himself.

"You know Croft. He's always gassing off about something. It was nothing."

Adama's ice-blue eyes glared at Apollo, as if reading his son's thoughts.

"I see," Adama said. "You don't wish to talk about it. Your privilege."

Privilege, that word again. It rankled Apollo and he had to struggle not to show any reaction to it.

"Yes, commander."

Adama turned to his second-in-command.

"Tigh, instruct the launch bay crew to finish pre-launch procedures with the shuttle. Alert Croft and Sheba to the mission, and tell them to proceed to launch bay on the double." Leaving Tigh to his duties, Adama returned his attention to his son. "Well, Apollo, do you require anything else?"

"No, sir. I'll send a report from the *Eureka* as soon as possible."

Turning around in crisp military fashion, Apollo hurried off the bridge. Adama stared after him, unaware that Tigh had returned to his side.

"Sir? Are you sure Croft should be on this mission?"

Adama sighed.

"No, Colonel Tigh, I'm not. But Apollo requested him. I believe he knows what he's doing."

Apollo rushed into the launch bay, still zipping up his flight-suit. Jenny, launch crew CWO, smiled, thinking, these hotshot pilots, they can't wait to get inside anything that flies. Put 'em on the back of a butterfly, they'd probably have it in battle readiness in a few centons. Jenny saluted Apollo smartly.

"Captain, shuttle is fueled and ready," she barked. "Everything checks out shipshape."

"Good. We'll launch as soon as my crew arrives."

"I'm here," Sheba called from behind him. He turned to greet her. "What's the drill?" she asked.

Apollo told her about the mutiny and described their mission. She shook her head from side to side and commented, "It's always something, isn't it? Somebody always dissatisfied, always ready to take advantage. Why can't people hold a steady course? Why are they always causing trouble?"

"It's our nature, my dear," Croft, who had come up behind her, said. "The nature of the beast."

Sheba, startled, wheeled around and stared at Croft, wondering who this strange, tough-looking man was. On his part, Croft was struck by Sheba's darkly good looks, especially her large questioning eyes. It had been a long time since he'd looked at a woman with interest, not since his wife Leda had died tragically on the ice planet.

"Sheba," Apollo intervened, "do you know Commander Croft?"

"No, I don't," Sheba answered. "But I *have* heard of you, sir."

Croft smiled. Apollo noted a softening in the man's features, and didn't much care for it.

"That covers a lot of territory," Croft said. "Could be good, could be bad."

"Good, Commander Croft."

"I'm not really a commander. It's just an honorary title, awarded me by the real commander, Adama. Still, I'm happy to find that such a lovely woman knows anything about me."

Apollo was uncomfortable with Croft's new smoothness. It was a side of the man he'd never observed before. He did not like to see it applied to Sheba.

"We haven't got time to chat out here," Apollo said, irritably. "Let's board the shuttle."

"Yes, Captain," Sheba said.

"Aye, aye, sir," Croft said sardonically, and eased past Apollo to go up the shuttle gangway. Apollo had followed Croft by a few steps when Starbuck came running into launch bay.

"Apollo!" he called. "I just heard about the mutiny. I'm going with you."

He started up the gangway, but Apollo laid a restraining hand on his shoulder and said, "That won't be necessary. We —"

"Necessary or not, I need to get away from the *Galactica* right now."

Apollo saw Cadet Hera emerge from the launch bay elevator, apparently looking for Starbuck.

"You stay here and solve your romantic problem, Starbuck," he said, smiling.

"Hey, Apollo, you know when it comes to that sort of problem I'm the fleet's biggest coward. Apollo—"

"You're needed here, it's as simple as that. You know what we agreed. On most noncombat missions, it's better for one of us to remain aboard the *Galactica*. If anything goes wrong at the *Eureka*, I'll need good backup, and that's you."

"Apollo—"

"No argument, Starbuck. We have sufficient personnel for the mission at hand."

Starbuck, crestfallen, looked down at his feet and muttered, "Okay, buddy. I shouldn't try to snag your vapor trail anyway." They shook hands. "Take care, friend."

"I will." Apollo turned and started up the gangway, then called back to Starbuck, "And, oh, good luck with your

amorous cadet there."

Starbuck glanced in Hera's direction.

"Thanks," he said, sullenly. "I'll need it."

Watching Apollo disappear into the interior darkness of the shuttle, Starbuck felt drained and empty inside. Just before Apollo was out of sight, Starbuck had felt a definite premonition of imminent danger. But that's ridiculous, he thought. Apollo could take care of himself; he doesn't need me. But why do I want to grab one of those rungs on the side of the shuttle and be dragged through the launch tube with him?

CHAPTER FOUR

Diving through an open hatchway, somersaulting, and landing on his feet with the ease of a cat, Chameleon continued his run without a stumble. He was agile beyond his years, lean and quick-moving in most situations. Because of his lifelong inclination toward sharp deals and gambling, he had had to develop the ability to make a fast exit. Now he was escaping from a shaggy pair of *Eureka* mutineers. They followed him through the hatchway moments later. In that time he had disappeared from view. The pursuers stopped and peered ahead, seeing only shadows and dim light. They held laserguns stiffly in front of them as they slowly stalked the corridor.

The two were Borellian Nomen, hairy humanoid creatures from a planet not known for hospitality. Clinging to old-fashioned codes and tribal customs, they were known for their blood hunts, a primitive rite of vengeance in which they were sworn to track down anyone who violated their customs or offended the pride of any individual Noman. The hide of their garments came from animals native to their home planet, Borellus. Since none of their animals had been preserved anywhere in the fleet after the final Cylon attack, their clothes were old and multipatched. They had taken on an odor that was painfully recognizable to anyone who was not a Borellian Noman.

"That fellow is slippery," one of them, a surly type named Brega, said.

"We must catch him," said his companion, Link. "He could spoil the whole operation."

"Could he?" Brega asked. "I must admit, I'd like to get my hands on him for all he's done to us. Resume the blood hunt

that Maga called off. But I can't see him as a danger to our hijacking of the *Eureka*."

"I just don't trust him. He's always been trouble. While he's loose, he's still a threat to all of us."

"Then why are we ordered merely to capture him? We should kill him."

They came to a junction, where two corridors met. Brega nodded toward the left one.

"You go that way. I'll try this."

Brega went in one direction, while Lingk took the other. After a moment, Chameleon came out of a dark shadowy alcove they had not noticed, smiling. He looked down both ways after his pursuers. He put a long finger to his pointed chin as he considered what to do next.

Although age had done some minor damage to Chameleon's face, he was still a handsome man. Within his triangular face, a broad forehead and high cheekbones above the small pointed chin, were features whose delicacy together with his physical gracefulness made him appear as suave and youthful as most men several yahrens younger than he. The gentle azure eyes that peeked out from his strong brow were almost childlike.

He listened to the footsteps of his pursuers fade out in each of the directions they had taken, then he made his way back along the way he'd originally come, keeping his back close to the wall, his eyes alert.

The mutineers gathered in a clump on the *Eureka's* bridge and watched the approach of *Galactica's* shuttle in the enormous view window. The leader of the mutiny, a Scorpion named Carome, stood back and considered his strategy. Carome had been a prisoner sent to the *Eureka* as part of a work-release detail. Earning the trust of the ship's

commander—an old man named Brock, whom Carome had killed at the outset of the mutiny—Carome had gradually arranged for more prisoners from the grid barge to be reassigned to the *Eureka*, knowing they could be of use in the taking over of the ship. He was especially proud of the contingent of Borellian Nomen, a breed noted for their fierce independence, who had agreed to serve under him. Their presence tended to verify his qualifications for leadership. Anyone who could handle a Borellian Noman was command material, all right.

It had been Carome's goal for some time to get away from the control of the *Galactica* and its arrogant supercilious officers, especially the smug martinet, Adama. He had decided he'd rather try his luck with the Cylons than stay with the wretched Galacticans and sit in stir while they continued their stupid quest for the mythical planet Earth.

"Bloody meddlers," Carome muttered as he stared at the shuttle. "I sent my demands. All we need is the ship and nobody stopping our separation from the fleet."

"Perhaps those on the shuttle are sent to negotiate," said one of the Nomen, Maga. Maga had an ominously deep voice which commanded attention even when he was whispering.

"Sure," Carome replied, "and I got hair all over my face like one of you Nomen."

In normal circumstances, a remark like Carome's was justification, according to Borellian tradition, for Maga to draw a laser bole and fling it at the speaker. However, the Nomen had agreed among themselves to hold their tempers no matter what happened, at least until the *Eureka* was safely away from Galactican hegemony. Neither Maga nor his closest ally, Bora, really trusted Carome. Nomen, in fact, rarely trusted anybody who wasn't a Noman. But they had needed Carome to instigate the mutiny and organize beings who normally would not have trusted Nomen or wanted

them in their midst. For the time being, Carome had to be allowed his whims, and even his stupidly sarcastic insults. There would be time for killing him later.

"Shall we allow them to land or send them back?" Bora asked Carome.

"Land. We might be able to turn this to our advantage."

"They fly under the flag of truce," Maga said.

"Bully for them. White flags are for cowards. Let's just see what they have to offer."

Maga and Bora exchanged apprehensive glances before following Carome and his angrily mumbling crew off the bridge. There was a limited amount of communication that Nomen could achieve simply through facial expressions. The look that Maga sent Bora showed doubt in Carome's leadership and fear that the man would force them into a position where they would have to go against their own Borellian codes. Bora's look said not to worry.

The shuttle slid to a smooth stop inside the *Eureka* landing bay. With Croft walking behind them, Apollo and Sheba disembarked to greet the *Eureka's* welcoming party. Apollo gave them no chance for diplomatic advantage. He spoke first.

"I demand to speak to the leader of this uprising."

"At your service, Captain Apollo," Carome said, separating himself from the mob.

"You know me then?"

"False modesty, Captain. Everybody in this godforsaken fleet knows you. And I also know the piece of barge peeling accompanying you and the lovely lady. Long time no see, Croft."

Croft stroked the handle of his laser pistol and smiled. Apollo touched his arm, moving his hand away from the pistol. Sheba took a couple of steps sideways, making sure she was in fighting position, should the need to fight arise.

"We served some time together back on the grid barge," Croft explained, his voice low and menacing. "And I had occasion to discipline him when I took over command. His name's Carome."

"Discipline?" Carome said, lingering over the syllables of the word. "Discipline? We've gotten pretty swell, haven't we, Croft? Too important to smell our own sweat. You didn't discipline me, you threw me into the sewer and let me float along with the garbage."

"I couldn't allow you to taunt me in front of the others."

"You think anything I said'd influence those grid rats? They knew you were a turncoat. Nothing I said would—"

"Hey," Apollo interrupted, "ease up, both of you. Carome, Commander Adama has given me full authorization to negotiate with you and your followers. If you turn over the helm to me immediately, no recriminative action will be taken. All of you—"

"You call that negotiation? You order, and we fold up?"

"The commander's word—"

"I'm supposed to believe the commander's word? No recriminative action? Felgercrab! I know how that kind of bilge works. A few centons after you take over, the transfers'll start coming through. We'll wind up swabbing toilets on some rust-heap dragging along at the rear of the fleet. Stow that, Captain."

Croft stepped forward.

"I'll vouch for the captain's word, Carome."

"You can't even vouch for slime rats, Croft," Carome sneered. "I don't even want to—"

"Hey, hey," Apollo intervened, "let's cool this off. We can go somewhere and discuss this—"

Carome turned and played to the mob.

"I'm not gonna continue this little stage show. We got no interest in your negotiations, Cap'n. But we got interest in you, as the commander's son. Grab him, men. And the others."

Apollo, Croft, and Sheba tried to reach for their guns, but they were surrounded too quickly by mutineers to act. The attackers quickly disarmed them.

"We're here under flag of truce," Apollo protested. "You can't—"

"Your white flag and two cubits'll get you admitted to the *Rising Star*," Carome said. "You're our hostage now, Captain Apollo. Best hostage the *Galactica* could have sent us. Let's see how your sainted father reacts when he hears. He won't think two microns before allowing us to leave the fleet."

As Apollo was being grabbed and shoved against the side of the shuttle, he hollered, "This isn't honorable!"

"You don't talk to scum like this about honor, Captain," Croft yelled, as he was pushed to Apollo's side.

"You can go suck a waste chute, Croft," Carome shouted. "Take 'em to the brig, men."

As Croft was hauled past him, Carome chuckled gleefully and said, "Well, Croft, you should find a cell homey, at least."

When the three Galactican envoys were pushed together at the end of the landing bay, Apollo muttered, "The commander won't give in to these thugs. He won't—"

"Won't he?" Croft asked sarcastically. "From what I've seen, with his precious boy in danger, he'll fold right up."

In back of them, Carome laughed in triumph and ordered his aides to get the commander on scan.

CHAPTER FIVE

Adama wondered if he should order Starbuck off the bridge. The intense young lieutenant was wearing a grooved path as he paced back and forth in a rear area. Boomer tried to say something to him, but Starbuck growled a rude response.

Other Viper pilots, all nearly as nervous as Starbuck, milled around, awaiting the order that Adama was certain he must soon give.

"No more word from the mutineers, sir," Tigh reported.

"Do we still have the ship's coordinates?" the commander asked.

"Yes, but even the long-range scan has its limitations. The signal will be getting weaker soon."

"You're sure there was no response to our transmission demanding immediate release of the hostages?"

"None."

Adama sighed. He removed a blue cloth from his tunic pocket and rubbed sweat away from his neck, then dried the palms of his hands nervously.

"It's what I've always said, Tigh. The actions of terrorists are as dangerous to fleet welfare as the attack of a Cylon task force. Is the patrol assembled?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Starbuck is merely awaiting your orders, Commander."

Adama wheeled around in crisp military fashion and barked: "Starbuck! Front and center!"

Starbuck very nearly leaped onto the platform where Adama stood. His salute was the neatest Adama had ever seen from the brash young lieutenant. Generally, he saluted from the famous academy skipilot slouch.

"This eagerness for duty isn't like you, Lieutenant."

"For Apollo, sir."

Adama felt some tears come into his eyes.

"Thank you, Starbuck. Apollo is lucky to have so good a friend. You're aware this is a high-risk mission?"

"Yes, sir."

"I leave action to your discretion. However, you understand that I don't wish to endanger the lives of the hostages. For the present, your patrol is only to track the hijacked ship and watch for an opportunity. We'll have Blue and Silver Spar Squadrons at readiness, should they be needed. Don't attempt any assaultive actions unless you're sure they'll work."

"Understood, sir."

Adama put his hands on the lieutenant's shoulders.

"Our hearts are with you, Starbuck. To your Vipers, all of you."

The pilots, led by Starbuck, hastened off the bridge. Adama watched them go, his feelings the mixture of sadness and pride he usually felt whenever he sent pilots on dangerous missions. So much was at stake this time, not only the lives of these daring and courageous warriors but of Apollo's and the others with him on the truce mission, plus all the other innocent people aboard the *Eureka*. He touched his breastplate medallion which legend said had been forged on Kobol, as he often did when considering the burden of command.

"The Lords of Kobol be with you all," he whispered.

"And may luck continue to be Starbuck's ally," Tigh said. The comment made Adama smile. The brash young man was famous for his luck in most situations. It was said he could slide out from under a lump of antimatter.

Adama put his arm around Tigh's shoulders and said, "Let's observe the launch."

"Yes, sir."

Starbuck hurried into the launch bay while mentally running through the preparation procedures he generally reviewed back in the prep room. Cassiopeia, who'd been awaiting his appearance, stepped in front of him. They nearly collided.

"Not now, Cassie," Starbuck said, taking an elaborate path around her. "Can't you see—"

She followed him and hollered in his ear.

"This is important, Starbuck!"

"What's more important than—"

"It's about the *Eureka*. Something you don't know."

"Honey bunch, there's a lot I don't know. Give me lessons when I get back."

"Damn it, Starbuck, listen to me!"

The tears in Cassiopeia's eyes, plus the urgency in her voice, brought him to a stop. His voice became compassionate as he took her hands and squeezed them.

"Sorry, Cassiopeia. I see it's important, whatever it is. But make it quick, please."

"It's Chameleon."

Starbuck smiled as soon as he heard the name. It brought up a pleasant memory of the old man.

"That old con man? What about him? He didn't die, did he?"

"He's on the *Eureka*. He'd just been transferred there."

"Sorry to hear that. I hope we can save Chameleon, too, but what's so important you have to stop me on the way to —"

"Starbuck, I'm not supposed to tell you this." Cassiopeia fiddled with the collar of her med-tech smock. He'd never seen her so agitated before. "He ordered me not to. And I vowed. But—but—he—that is, Chameleon—Chameleon, he is—"

"Cassie, what is it? Spit it out!"

"He—he really is what you thought he was."

"Really is what? I don't—"

"Starbuck, you moron, he really is your *father*."

Starbuck felt like he'd been hit in the face by an iron Cylon gauntlet.

"My father? But the genetic tests—"

"It was the genetic tests that proved it."

"But I thought—"

"I know. That they were negative. He wanted you to think that. Listen." She struggled to gain control of her emotions, so she could describe her last meeting with Chameleon coherently. "You remember the genetic testing we did with you and him?"

"Of course."

When Starbuck first encountered him, Chameleon had been posing as a genetic tracer, a profession that had developed after the Cylons had conquered the twelve home worlds and the survivors had been assembled into *Galactica's* ragtag fleet. Genetic tracing involved a series of tests designed to establish relationships among the survivors. In the procedure, neurological cell samples from both subjects were taken and put through several technical tests. As a result, families could be reunited. Certain correspondences in the histories of Chameleon and Starbuck led them both to believe there was a chance they could be father and son. The genetic tests were performed in

Galactica's Life Center, with Cassiopeia acting as chief med-tech.

"Right after you and he battled those two Nomen in the launch bay, the results of the tests came in from the lab. And they were positive. I rushed to Chameleon and found him sitting quietly outside Commander Adama's quarters. I thought he'd be enthusiastic."

"And he wasn't? He didn't want me?"

She touched the side of Starbuck's face with the side of her hand.

"No, I don't think it's that. Anyway, I ran in yelling that the tests were positive. He was quite stunned, then he said it must be a mistake. No, I said, I've gone over it—but before I could finish, he touched me gently on my lips to silence me. Then he said the tests had to be negative. His eyes were sad and angry at the same time. He said you were planning to give up your career and your friends and everything to go with him. He called himself an old fool and said it'd be wrong for you to give all that up in order to try to recapture time that was gone forever. Then he begged me to report the tests as negative. I protested, but he said he could be your friend if you didn't know he was your father. He said he'd be a good friend, which was more important than being a father who would take you away from the place where you were vitally needed."

Starbuck couldn't speak. He took Cassiopeia tenderly into his arms. As he hugged her, tears trickling out the corners of his eyes, he noticed Hera smiling over at him. What was she doing here now? he thought. Why now? And in full battle regalia? She's only a cadet.

He tried not to look at her as he thought of what Cassie had told him. He was awed, but at the same time a little angry that Chameleon had decided not to tell him. All those years he'd been an orphan, Starbuck had longed for a father.

He had dreamed of shadowy beings who would suddenly step forward and claim him as their son. He had imagined a detailed portrait of what he wanted in a father, a portrait which Chameleon had matched surprisingly well.

Why had Chameleon been so damn unselfish? There were times when a little selfishness didn't hurt. Still, perhaps he was right, angry as it made Starbuck admit it to himself. Perhaps his decision had left his son where he belonged. It had been a selfish decision for Starbuck to decide to leave the colonial warrior service and follow his father's footsteps into the pursuit of scientific knowledge. What kind of scientist would he have made? And, anyway, his father was a slick con man and not a scientist.

Starbuck belonged in the cockpit of a Viper. In the time since Chameleon had left the *Galactica*, Starbuck had saved many lives with his flying and combat skills. So Chameleon had been wise to keep him from abandoning all that for sentimental reasons. It had been, after all, a father's decision, the kind of guidance Starbuck had longed for all his life.

"I didn't want the knowledge kept from you," Cassiopeia was saying, "but I had no choice. He wanted it, and I had to go along with him. He said something about telling you on the day you were sealed. Well, it's become obvious, under the circumstances, that would be too long a wait."

Starbuck recalled telling Chameleon that Cassiopeia had been the only woman for whom he'd ever consider giving up his free-wheeling womanizing life, taking her as his wife in the sacred sealing ceremony. However, in the time since, their relationship had cooled. He regretted that.

"I had to tell you, Starbuck," Cassiopeia said, sadly.

He hugged her more tightly.

"It's all right, Cass. It's very much all right. I can't wait to see the old bilge-crow again. And I'm afraid I have to go. On

this little foray, every centon counts. I'll thank you properly later."

"Counting on it," Cassiopeia said as he released her and began running toward his Viper. His move set the whole squadron into action. The launch bay was filled with the anticipation of awesome wall-shaking takeoffs. Cassiopeia, wiping away wetness from her cheeks, turned and walked to the elevator bank.

As Starbuck approached his Viper, he found Boomer waiting for him there. Starbuck pointed toward Hera, who was now climbing into one of the rear Vipers.

"What in Kobol is *she* doing here?"

"She's qualified for it," Boomer said. "We're undermanned."

"But she's only a cadet. This is a high-risk mission, Boomer."

"Can't be helped. Commander's orders. Highest-ranking cadet's to be added to this mission, and Hera's it. Look, bucko, we got a third of the squadron either in Life Station with injuries or suffering from intense battle fatigue. We need to leave some of the best pilots, like Greenbean and Jolly, back here to protect the *Galactica*."

"But she could be killed!"

Boomer shrugged. His eyes clouded a bit with the fear that was a part of every Viper pilot's emotional gear.

"So could we all, bucko, so could we all," he said.

Starbuck, however, was not through with his protests.

"She'll endanger the rest of us."

"She's flying wingmate with Bojay. He'll look after her. He's good with cadets. Don't worry. We've taken cadets on dangerous missions before."

"And lost a lot of 'em."

"The risks of war, you've said so yourself. What is this, bucko? Does this one have some special meaning for you? Is she one of your—"

"No, damn it, she's not one of my . . . whatevers. God on Kobol, what do you bozos think I am, some kind of reckless womanizer?"

"Well, if the power-pack fits . . ."

Starbuck clenched his fists, ready to plant one on the nose of his buddy and wingmate.

"I should clobber you, Boomer."

Boomer's huge hands grabbed Starbuck's arms.

"What's got into you, Starbuck? This isn't just because we got a cadet flying with us, is it?"

The rage went out of Starbuck, and he felt deflated.

"No, it's not, old friend. Hera's a good pilot. Taught her myself, right? I just got some . . . some disquieting news. Makes me edgy."

"Want to talk about it, buddy?"

Starbuck smiled.

"Sure, let's talk, right now while the squadron sits patiently in their cockpits. Later, Boomer."

"You got it, bucko."

Boomer rushed off to his Viper, situated next to Starbuck's. Starbuck, taking his flight helmet from the CWO, Jenny, performed his famous into-the-saddle leap into his cockpit and gave the command to launch. His Viper trembled with the force of the journey down the launch tube, cleared the *Galactica*, and waited for the squadron to form behind him. The assembled squadron made a magnificent sight as it accelerated, reduced quickly to

several tiny lights, then blended into a single pinpoint before disappearing into the darkness of space.

"*Eureka's* locked on scan, Starbuck," Boomer reported, his voice a resonantly deep rumble as it came over commcircuit.

"Got it, Boomer," Starbuck replied. "You can bet this little baby won't get off my scanner."

Bojay spoke next, asking, "How soon till we initiate assaultive procedures?"

"I don't know, Bojay. When we can do it without hurting Apollo and Sheba."

"Starbuck, that could be forever!"

"Patience, skypilot."

"I don't like the idea of Sheba in the clutches of those . . . those lousy scumeaters."

Bojay and Sheba had been shipmates on the *Pegasus*, the battlestar commanded by her brave but reckless father, the legendary Commander Cain.

"Take it easy, Bojay. We'll do the job, you can depend on that. We just have to proceed slowly."

Bojay laughed sarcastically.

"You, the famous hothead, advising caution?"

"Orders, Bojay. Just monitor your telemetry, and make sure your laser generator's always on charge."

Bojay grumbled but dropped into silence. The next voice along the commcircuit was Hera's.

"Lieutenant Starbuck?"

Like all cadets on their first big mission, the tone of her voice was tentative, even a bit shy. Starbuck smiled at the idea of the tall, supremely confident Hera being shy.

"Yes, Cadet?"

"I just performed a long-range random scan. There's, well, another ship in this sector, and it appears headed for the *Eureka*."

A new wrinkle, Starbuck thought. This was the first new ship detected by anyone in a long time.

"Could be a Cylon fighter or base-star," Starbuck commented. "Can you identify, Cadet?"

"No, too far away for detailed scan."

"All right, then. Stay on it. Keep track. Let me know when you have more data. And, Cadet, good work."

Hera's voice was now more confident. There was a definite military crispness in her reply.

"Yes, sir."

"Not so formal on patrol. Back on the *Galactica* formality's fine but out here you can get killed with formalities."

"Thank you, Starbuck."

Her words seemed uncomfortably friendly, and Starbuck wondered what he was letting himself in for. Sighing, he checked his control dash and set a steady course in pursuit of the scanner dot he knew was the *Eureka*.

He relaxed, pressing his stiff tense body against the padding of his seat. He could use a drink now, but Viper pilots never kept intoxicating beverages in the cockpit. Apollo's orders. Once upon a time, a little nip while flying along stirred a fighter pilot's spirits, but too many lives had been lost of those who couldn't count their nips.

For the first time since launch Starbuck allowed himself to think about Chameleon. His father. Could it be? Could it really be?

He recalled the first time he'd met the man, on the luxury starliner *Rising Star*. Starbuck had been trying out a new gambling system in the liner's lavish casino, a way of beating the game of single-meld pyramid. He had had many

systems before, all of which had failed, but he was sure of this one. After spending many nights in his bunk working with his calcutronic scan, considering the math from all angles, he was sure this system would work. It couldn't miss, in fact.

At first, with the cynical Apollo sitting beside him and offering little in the way of encouragement, Starbuck had played cautiously. But, as his calculations came true and he began winning more and more, he started upping his bets. He was only vaguely aware of the man sliding gracefully into the seat next to him and playing a single cubit which returned three.

At that moment, Chameleon was already on the run from a pair of Borellian Nomen whose twisted but rigid code of honor had marked Chameleon for death because of what they perceived as a livestock swindle. At that time Chameleon had posed as Captain Dimitri, commander of the livestock ship *Agro*. He had discovered that the Nomen were clandestinely hoarding food and supplies that were in dire demand on all the other ships of the fleet, and had designed his con job to deprive them of finances that would have been used to harm others, then to recirculate the money back into useful channels. However, he had not realized that Borellian Nomen, when they saw their honor offended had no choice but to avenge. Their vengeance took the form of a blood hunt in which they pursued the offender with every ounce of their energies. It was said that a Noman on a blood hunt was the most monomaniacal being in the known universe. In his flight from them, Chameleon had found no reason to contradict that saying.

Chameleon watched Starbuck as the young lieutenant gleefully raked in winnings and increased his bets. When Starbuck had put all of his profits at risk, Chameleon, touched by the energetic gambler's enthusiasm and dedication, leaned toward him and whispered that his

system had an inherent flaw in it. Starbuck, so confident that he'd worked everything out perfectly, was flabbergasted. However, Chameleon pointed out to him that, while there were three-to-one odds against the dealer holding a capstone card, it could happen. The system didn't consider that. Starbuck, startled, withdrew most of his cubits, a lucky move since, of course, the dealer flipped over a capstone and won everybody's wagers. Starbuck, eager to revise his system and play more, was dragged away from the game by Apollo.

In the gaming room's bar area, Chameleon bought a round of Ambrosas for the three of them, using a portion of his small winnings as payment. Starbuck had not known at the time how little money the apparently affluent old man possessed. In order to remain on the *Rising Star*, Chameleon had had to borrow a stake from Siress Blassie, a woman whose generosity was based on a romantic interest in him. While dancing with this woman, Chameleon had been spotted by the Nomen and had been forced to beat a hasty retreat.

Over the drinks, Chameleon explained to Starbuck that he had used the gambling system Starbuck thought he'd discovered several yahrens ago, back on Caprica. He did comment, though, that he'd never before encountered anyone else who'd devised and played it. Starbuck was warmed by the nice gentleman's praise.

Apollo asked Chameleon if he knew such systems because he was a professional gambler. Chameleon demurred, saying that he had been but was now a genetic tracer. The response had been a calculated one, designed to lead Starbuck toward the idea that he and Chameleon might be related. He had never been a genetic tracer. It was only a profession he had heard of in his active travels through the ships of the fleet. Genetic tracers united the orphans of the twelve

worlds' disaster with their relatives by the matching of neurological cell samples, he explained.

Chameleon cleverly helped Starbuck to a conclusion he had planned beforehand. On his trip to the *Rising Star* he had seen an interview with Starbuck on the Interfleet Broadcasting System entertainment channel. The information he supplied Starbuck suggested that his baby son had escaped from a Cylon raid in which Chameleon's wife had been killed. His search for his baby son, he said, had influenced him in his decision to go into genetic tracing as his life's work. Since Chameleon was a Caprican and had once had a family there, he was able to supply credible details easily. At that time he never believed that the pleasantly smiling young man with the unruly straw-colored hair now sitting across from him could actually be the son he had lost back on Caprica, in spite of the truthful correspondences. His story was a dodge he had used to get out of a couple of past scrapes. What he needed was a way off the *Rising Star*, away from the Nomen who were much too hot on his trail, his blood trail.

As he piled on each detail, he almost regretted the bright light that grew in Starbuck's eyes (as he told Starbuck later, in a tearful confession scene). Starbuck, never one to downplay an emotion, became more and more excited as he listened to the skillful con man's story. He nearly fell off his seat when Chameleon mentioned the Caprican thorn forests and the agro community of Ombra, the area in which the child Starbuck had been found after a Cylon raid. In spite of his friend Apollo's counselings of caution, he became instinctively convinced that he was looking into the eyes of his father, eyes the same color as his own. Those eyes, and the fact that they had both devised the same gambling system, struck Starbuck as immediate proof. He practically begged to begin the genetic tests.

Chameleon claimed it would be impossible to conduct the tests at the orphan ship, where they had a backup of too many cases on their waiting list. However, he suggested, a hemo-type and iris cone match could be done with the equipment which would undoubtedly be found on the Life Center of the *Galactica*. Apollo contacted his father on the *Galactica*, and Adama agreed that the tests could be conducted there. As a result, Chameleon obtained a legitimate reason to remove himself from the *Rising Star* (there was a tense moment as he and Starbuck had to walk by the vengeful Nomen in the visitors' lounge) and into a shuttle going to the *Galactica*. He did not suspect at the time that the Nomen would be able to follow him to the command battlestar by pretending to be recruits to the cadet ranks of the Colonial Warrior Viper Squadrons.

As he sat beside Chameleon in the shuttle and listened to the old man's tales, including his recent almost-offhand conquest of the wealthy Siress Blassie, Starbuck became more and more convinced he had to be related to this man. He was unaware of the doubts that were building in his friends Apollo and Boomer, nor that they would eventually arrange for a security check on Chameleon.

Cassiopeia ran the simple tests Chameleon had suggested. The results showed that Starbuck and the dapper old man were from the same planet and tribe, and were no doubt related within perhaps ten generations. However, she carefully pointed out, there were hundreds of people in the fleet who could match them on these scientifically inconclusive initial tests. Therefore, Cassiopeia agreed to perform the more exhausting genetic tests that would establish definite proof of their relationship. At this point, Chameleon was merely biding his time, glad to be away from the threat of the Nomen and rather enjoying his time with the exuberant young man who obviously liked him more than any other individual in the twenty yahrens since he

had lost his wife. He regretted toying with the boy's emotions, but he also knew how to run a con and how to repress sympathy.

Starbuck remembered the fear with which he'd begun the genetic testing. It was not only fear of the testing itself, but a deep apprehension that the man of whom he'd already grown quite fond would, after all, prove *not* to be his father. A finite laser extractor had withdrawn the image of a single neuro cell from his brain, then Chameleon's, and the first stage of comparative examination was initiated. Starbuck felt relief. Whatever the tests showed, he was happy they had begun. As Chameleon talked warmly with him, reminiscing about the woman who could be Starbuck's mother, Starbuck had felt certain that his search for his father had ended. Even later, when he had been told otherwise, he had thought, in the midst of his disappointment, that Chameleon *ought* to be his father. After that initial test, he had told Chameleon that one day he hoped to be sealed to Cassiopeia. He had never said that aloud before, never mentioned it to Apollo or Boomer.

When the tests were finished, events occurred so fast that Starbuck felt as if he had been drawn into a vortex of emotion. First, he discovered that Apollo had ordered a security check on Chameleon. Angry that Apollo had interfered with his happiness, Starbuck had accused his friend of lack of faith and declared the end of their friendship. He stalked away before anyone could tell him that there was no listing of anyone named Chameleon in fleet records.

Starbuck, in despair, decided to throw over all that he had gained as a colonial warrior. With his friends against him, there seemed no point to climbing into the cockpit of his Viper and flying long, usually fruitless, patrols.

In the meantime, the vengeful Borellian Nomen, placed in cadet quarters after their arrival on *Galactica*, overpowered

the officer there and disguised themselves as flight crewmen. Knowing that wherever Starbuck was, Chameleon would be nearby, they roamed the corridors, asked Galactican personnel the whereabouts of Lieutenant Starbuck. They found someone who had last seen him on the way to Launch Bay Alpha with a civilian visitor. The Nomen, intent on their blood hunt, their bodies heating up with the fierceness of it, headed toward the launch bay.

In Alpha Bay, Starbuck showed Chameleon, now ensconced in the pilot seat, how the controls of the Viper worked. Chameleon appeared particularly impressed by the laser generator switch, commenting on the awesome firepower it could unleash.

Then Starbuck sprang his surprise, announcing that he was resigning his commission and leaving the Colonial Warrior Service. Chameleon seemed shocked by the revelation. He squirmed in the cockpit seat and looked pained as Starbuck spoke of his newfound desire to do something meaningful with his life by participating in the genetic tracing project. Chameleon protested that the *Galactica* needed him, he was a hero, but Starbuck merely brushed that off by saying there were plenty of hotshot pilots to take his place. Starbuck's zeal to change his life because of him moved Chameleon, made him feel proud. Still, he knew he could not allow it and was about to protest when the sound of the descending elevator reverberated through the launch bay. There was not supposed to be anyone in Alpha Bay at that time, and Starbuck was puzzled when he saw two men in hangar crew outfits step off the elevator. Chameleon, recognizing his pursuers and sinking into the cockpit, said he didn't think the two new arrivals were part of the hangar crew.

Starbuck challenged the two, whom he saw were Borellian Nomen. One of them said they were on a blood hunt for a Captain Dimitri. Before he knew how or why, Starbuck was in

combat with the Nomen. Crouching behind a support beam, he watched the two gleaming spheres of a laser bole flash by him. He stepped from behind the beam and fired at the Nomen, then had to duck another laser bole which sliced the support beam. The subsequent explosion sent Starbuck sliding across the floor. His laser gun flew out of his hand and skidded beneath the Viper.

Sensing that the Nomen were stalking him now, two more laser boles already plucked from their chest belts, Starbuck scrabbled to his feet and started running down the launch tube. Behind him his pursuers let go of their laser boles which sailed down the tunnel at him. He dove to the floor and heard the boles spin by above him.

The Nomen came after him, but he managed to climb upon the launch rail and watch them move by slowly below him. Then he leaped down and hustled back up the launch tube, his body tensing as he heard the initial low whine of a generating laser bole behind him. As he reached the end of the tube, Chameleon hollered for him to hit the deck. Plunging to the floor just outside the launch tube, he heard Chameleon fire the Viper's laser guns down the launch tube. The firing caused an enormous explosion which was followed by thick smoke pouring out of the tube.

The next thing Starbuck was aware of was Chameleon leaning over him, screaming his name. Starbuck said only his father would fire laser guns in a launch tube. Apollo arrived with Boomer and ship security, and they took away the Nomen, who miraculously still lived. After Starbuck had explained they had been on a blood hunt for a Captain Dimitri, Chameleon admitted that he had been Dimitri and explained his swindle of the Nomen.

Since he thought the genetic tests had been negative, Starbuck easily accepted the idea that Chameleon had been using him as a way to flee the blood hunt by departing the *Rising Star*. He apologized to Apollo and Boomer and offered

to visit Chameleon in between duty tours. Chameleon was dispatched to the senior ship at the request of Siress Blassie, who had taken an interest in him. He seemed strangely reluctant to go. Even then Starbuck sensed there was a secret. He had never, however, expected it to be that Chameleon really was his father.

The last time he had seen Chameleon had been in the lavish quarters of Siress Blassie. The woman had seen to it that they were well fed and left them with their drink and cigars while she performed her daily round of supervisory duties at the crafts arena. At first Chameleon had been unusually glum, but Starbuck's cheerful patter had soon cheered him up.

When Starbuck had to leave, however, the glumness had returned for a moment as Chameleon said, "Take care of yourself out there, you hear?"

"Always do," Starbuck replied. Chameleon grabbed his arm tightly.

"I hear you don't. I hear you're reckless. Just take it easy."

Put off by the old man's seriousness, Starbuck chose to reply lightly, "Don't worry. The luck of the tribe is with me."

"For now?"

"What's worrying you?"

The skin around Chameleon's eyes wrinkled with concern.

"I had a dream," he said. "You were alone, abandoned, on an unpopulated planet. Just a dream, maybe, but I woke up sweating. So, just take it easy, okay?"

"For a man who's been proven not to be my father, you're awfully paternal."

"Ignore it. Habit of age, is all."

They had resumed their cheerfulness and Starbuck had left. The next time he'd tried to visit him, Siress Blassie mournfully told him that Chameleon had sneaked away

during one of her sleep periods. She had tried unsuccessfully to trace him. Starbuck regretted that his visits with the old man had ended, but at the same time glad that he was out of the clutches of the generous but possessive sire. He hadn't seen Chameleon since.

And now the crafty old man was one of the captives aboard the *Eureka*.

"Hey, wait," Starbuck said aloud. "Why should I assume he's a prisoner? With his orneriness, he might be one of the mutineers. Hope not."

Starbuck wished he had Chameleon in front of him. He'd give the old man a piece of his mind. Why in Kobol had he never told him the truth? Why did he let him go on believing the lie? Was there something wrong, something in Starbuck that kept Chameleon from claiming him as his son? Starbuck didn't know whether to resent Chameleon or simply be glad that the truth had finally come out.

This time, Starbuck vowed, the two would work at being father and son. He would explain to Chameleon how much he needed a father—to attend to, to talk to, to love. He had spent so much time envying the relationship of Apollo and Adama, even though that pair was hardly the warmest twosome in the universe. Both of them could be stiff-backed and distant, especially with each other. But they had a relationship, and that was important. Starbuck, thinking himself an orphan all of his life, longed for such a relationship. Whatever reasons Chameleon had for denying his son the truth, Starbuck was content to forgive him for them. The main goal now was to reunite with the old man and then iron things out.

He thought of Apollo and Sheba, imagined them imprisoned on the *Eureka*. Croft, too, for all his bad temper. The squadron couldn't track the *Eureka* forever. There was the problem of fuel, plus the uncertainties of what the

mutineers would do now. He stared down at his scanner screen, at the blip that represented the *Eureka*, trying to relate that blip to the reality of the ship itself. Did it—

"Starbuck?" Hera's voice interrupted his reverie.

"Yes, Hera?"

"That ship, the other one. It's definitely not Cylon. The Warbook shows no profile that matches it. It still appears to be heading for the *Eureka*. Do you suppose it intends to rendezvous with the *Eureka*?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to keep an eye on it. Your eye, Hera."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Her voice was enthusiastic, pleased.

Starbuck felt uneasy about the unidentified ship. In this sector of space the odds were against meeting a lone spacecraft. He felt this one had some purposeful mission, but they would have to wait to find out what it was.

CHAPTER SIX

Croft had seen roomier cells in the prison barge's solitary confinement block. A person alone could get claustrophobic in such a cell, but for the three of them, it was like being wedged together in a closet. He couldn't take a step without bumping into Apollo or Sheba, or both.

The cell was about as deteriorated as the *Eureka*, which he found one of the saddest excuses for a fleet vessel he'd ever had the bad luck to be trapped in. The padded walls and ceiling were decaying. Strips of cloth hung down and dirty odorous padding material peeked out of the holes in ugly clumps.

Croft felt enraged, Apollo's face was locked in a grim mask, and Sheba appeared to have the weight of several worlds on her attractively broad shoulders. A great threesome, the kind of trio that could wow an audience with elegies. Even in the midst of his wrath, Croft was amused. Here he was, in the service of the good guys, winding up in the usual cell, a prisoner again. He'd been jailed for a good portion of his life and, as always, he wanted out.

"I can't believe they'd pull such a double-cross," Apollo said suddenly. "On a truce mission, for God's sake!"

Croft's laugh was abrupt and cruel.

"You think they should've honored the white flag, Captain?"

"They allowed us on board. On any ship that means—"

"This ain't any ship. Did you take a good look at our welcoming party? They're crud, pure crud. Not only are most of 'em former inmates of the prison barge, the rest were not exactly high society, Apollo. There were some Borellian Nomen among the group, slinking in the rear. See them?"

"Yes. But Borellian Nomen at least go by a fiercely held code."

"I don't think their code includes the niceties of space etiquette," Croft said. "They saw the shuttle, and they saw hostages, simple as that. Sending us over here in the first place was the stupid act. Your father thinks he can bully anybody into submission. Well, that's not—"

"Leave my father out of this, Croft."

Sheba planted herself in front of Croft, and their bodies touched. Being confined with this young lady, Croft thought, had its benefits.

"Yes, Commander Croft," she said. "There's no point in us getting worked up into a froth with a petty argument."

"Petty?" Croft said. He could smell a faint perfumelike odor emanating, it seemed, from Sheba's hair. It reminded him of the scent of a flower that grew on Khelana, a planet where he and Leda had spent their most romantic vacation. "I'm not talking petty here. I'm talking command politics. The outmoded governing system that's sending this fleet to—"

"Croft!" Apollo yelled. His breath was hot and moist on Croft's neck. It was certainly difficult to be emotional in such small quarters. "Just shut up!"

Croft tried to turn around to face Apollo. He couldn't. He twisted his head toward him. Pains shot through his neck.

"Yeah, Captain. You going to force me?"

"I will if I have to."

"Hey, you guys are acting like children," Sheba said. Croft could feel her breasts pressing against his arm.

"Stay out of this, Sheba," Apollo said, "this is our—"

"Is this a private fight or may I join in?" said a voice outside the cell. Apollo whirled around without jarring either of his cellmates, and saw Chameleon standing there, his legs crossed as he leaned casually against the opposite wall.

Apollo moved forward, taking care not to make contact with the force field which served as the cell door. He had bumped into it a couple of times already and been jolted with a small but painful dose of electrical charge.

"Chameleon!" Apollo cried. "What in Kobol are you doing here?"

"Chameleon?" Croft muttered to Sheba. "Who's he?"

"It's a long story, Croft," Sheba said, and turned away from him to grin at Chameleon. Croft shrugged. From the goofy looks on the faces of Apollo and Sheba, this Chameleon must be some sort of fellow.

"I was on *Eureka's* staff," Chameleon explained. "Before the mutineers took over. I gave them a fight. Now they're after me, looking all over the ship." He glanced suddenly to his right, then crouched in the shadow of an open cell, saying, "Tell you more later. Somebody's coming."

For a moment Apollo wondered if Chameleon was seeing ghosts, then he heard the clunking sound of people clomping through the corridor. Soon Carome, backed by a contingent of his fellow mutineers, stood before the force-field door. Apollo noticed the heavy-browed physiognomy of a Noman in the rear of the group.

"Ah, Captain Apollo," Carome said in a cloying voice. "I trust you and your companions are settled in."

Apollo's gesture clearly indicated the smallness of the cell.

"Hardly," he said.

"Oh? Well, you must endure some discomfort. I couldn't put you up in the commander's cabin, after all. I wanted to inform you that the *Eureka* has separated from the fleet ranks and is headed out toward deep space. Your father has promised that he will not interfere with our new course."

"Then you will release us now, let us return in the shuttle to the *Galactica*."

Carome's chuckle echoed tauntingly through the cell block.

"Hardly," he said, taking care to pronounce the word with the same inflection Apollo had used. "As long as we have you as our guest, Captain, we are insured from attack by the *Galactica*. We won't let you and your companions go until we've put a galaxy between us and the fleet."

"But the shuttle is a limited-space vehicle. It can't cross a galaxy. We'll never be able to return in it."

"A pity."

Carome's look of triumph was so ugly that Apollo wished he could reach through the force field and rub his fist in it. Then he noticed a flicker of movement from the shadows that Chameleon had disappeared into. Chameleon's face came in sight, his long thin fingers tapping his lips to tell Apollo to be quiet about him. Whatever the man was up to, Apollo realized he should employ a diversionary action.

"The fleet won't abandon us, Carome," Apollo said.

"Don't be so sure of that, Captain."

Chameleon, not making a sound, gracefully moved to a position behind the mutineer who Apollo recognized as the man who'd thrown them into the cell in the first place. Dangling from the man's belt was the lockcard that turned the force-field barrier on and off. Chameleon's eyes were fixed on it.

"Commander Adama has made it clear," Carome continued, "that the twin goals of the *Galactica* are pre-eminent. First, the flight from the Cylons, and second, the search for this fabled ridiculous place, Earth."

The jailer's head turned slightly to the left. He was almost looking at Chameleon, who seemed not at all alarmed by the threat of discovery. Instead, he reached down and, in a swift graceful move, slipped the lockcard off its chain without

causing even a ripple to go through the links of the cabin. Chameleon then retreated back into the shadows so rapidly, he seemed to vanish like a ghost.

"The commander, I'm afraid, will even abandon his son for the sake of the fleet," Carome was saying. "Regretfully, I am certain, but with the obsessive decisiveness that has characterized his leadership."

What Carome said made some sense, Apollo realized. Adama would not endanger the ships of the fleet to recover one stray ship, or three lost warriors. However, if he could find any other way, he would be quick to use it. That was Apollo's best hope now.

"Let *them* go back, Carome," Croft said. "I'll stay as your hostage. But these two are much too valuable to the safety of—"

"You amuse me, Croft," Carome said. "Still as devious as ever. You think you have any worth as a hostage? They'd be on us like fur on a daggit, soon as the captain here got back to the *Galactica*. He'd probably be in his super Viper, leading the attack against us. No, we need the illustrious Captain Apollo here to keep the *Galactica* away. Grid rats make lousy hostages, Croft."

"Carome, you—"

Croft made a lunge toward the cell door. His hand briefly penetrated the force field and a numbing shock went up his arm and across his chest. Apollo pulled him back.

"Easy, Croft," Apollo said. "We have to go along with him."

Croft, disgusted, wrenched his arm away from Apollo's grip.

"How can you say that, Apollo? Coward!"

"Maybe. But I believe we should cooperate with Carome."

"Commander Carome," Carome said sternly.

Apollo's head made a slight bowing motion as he said: "Commander."

"Apollo," Croft said, "you can't—"

"I can."

Croft pushed his way past Apollo and Sheba to the rear wall of the cell.

"Always knew you had no guts, knew that the first time I saw you."

Apollo smiled sardonically toward Croft, then turned back to Carome and said to him in a soft, polite voice, "Forgive my colleague's temper, Commander."

Carome was clearly pleased with Apollo's cooperation. His smile was smug and cheerful.

"Forgiven, Captain. Croft is well-known for flying off the handle, after all. I am happy to find you so amenable, Captain Apollo. That will go in your favor when we meet next."

Carome gestured to his squad of mutineers and the entire party started down the corridor. When their heavy footsteps had faded, Chameleon re-emerged from the shadows, holding the lockcard high.

"Thank you, Apollo—for the diversion," Chameleon said.

"My pleasure, Chameleon."

Whirling around, Croft's mouth dropped open.

"What's going on here?" he said.

"The captain kept our band of mutineers busy while I relieved the jailer of this," Chameleon explained. "But we must work fast before he realizes I copped it. It'll take a moment to dope out the combination."

Chameleon slid the lockcard into a slot next to the cell. It clicked into place and a blue operating light showed that the lock was activated. Chameleon stared at the half of the

lockcard that was still outside the slot. He touched a few of the numbers tentatively, holding his head close to the card.

"These lockcard key combinations can be tricky," he whispered. "But the right numbers usually sound just the slightest bit different. There. Those, I think, are the numbers—but in what combination?"

He continued to work with the numbers, careful not to press the tiny bottom circle that would transmit the numbers to the lock itself. If he sent the numbers in the wrong order, it would set off an alarm and there wouldn't be time to try a different combination. His fingers flew smoothly and gracefully over the number grid of the card.

Croft leaned toward Apollo and whispered, "You were just faking all that nicey-nicey with Carome?"

" 'Course he was," Sheba said. "So Chameleon could lift the lockcard from the jailer's belt."

Croft nodded.

"Sorry, Captain. I should've known . . ."

"No need to apologize. Actually, your outburst helped just as much. Kept their attention away from what Chameleon was doing."

"There," Chameleon said proudly, and, with a flicker, the cell-door barrier was gone. Apollo and Sheba were first out of the cell, followed by a cautious Croft, who peered up and down the corridor. He never felt comfortable when things went easy.

"We'll need some weapons," Apollo said to Chameleon.

"Nothing easier. Follow me."

As they headed for the end of the corridor, there was a commotion behind them. Whirling around, they saw the jailer and three other mutineers running toward them, their laserguns out of their holsters.

"We've got to make tracks," Apollo cried. "Let's go."

Several shots singed the walls beside them and cut grooves in the flooring. Croft felt a beam come so close it seemed to singe his hair ends. A hole suddenly appeared in the sleeve of Sheba's tunic.

They reached the hatchway at the corridor's end, and Chameleon flung it open. In turn, they each dived through as shots bounced off the walls near them.

Carome was not prepared for the news of the prisoners' escape, and he nearly struck the crewman who'd brought the message. Turning to an aide, he ordered, "Mobilize all off-duty personnel. We'll scour the ship. And triple the guard around their shuttle."

Maga and Bora, standing in their usual background positions, exchanged glances which, in the facial language of the Borellian Nomen, displayed to themselves (but not to others) their doubts about Carome's abilities to recapture the prisoners. Carome feared the Nomen. They could easily kill him if they thought that was the right thing. It was important to keep a Borellian Noman content.

Maga and Bora listened to the messenger's report with interest, especially when the nervous crewman revealed that the man who'd been spotted with the prisoners, and who no doubt had helped with the escape, was Chameleon.

"He probably stole the keys himself," Carome commented. "He's a slippery one, all right. Isn't that right, Maga? Bora? . . . Maga? Bora?"

He turned to find that the Nomen had left the bridge. They always moved with sleek silence. Carome shrugged. Borellian Nomen would always be a mystery to him.

They had run in a twisting maze through the *Eureka* until their pursuers had lost them completely, then Chameleon

led them into a cavernous dark chamber. Weird shadows seemed to enclose threatening shapes. There was a strange jumble of noises, some of them coming from living beings.

"What in hell is this place?" Croft said.

"Anthrobiology lab," Chameleon answered. Chameleon, even after the others had come to rest at the foot of a base holding a large cage, couldn't stop moving. He peered around crates, peered down aisles.

"What kind of work goes on here?" Sheba asked.

"Study of representative animals, some saved from the twelve worlds, others captured on planets we've visited. The scientists specialize in testing their adaptability for dozens of possible environments."

Satisfied they were safe for the moment, Chameleon relaxed and leaned his slim wiry body against a tall crate. Even after a long chase, he looked elegant.

Apollo glanced up and saw the kind apelike face of one of the animals staring benignly down at him.

"Where are the scientists now?" Apollo asked.

"I don't know. Most of them didn't go along with the mutineers and were locked away. And the rest, well, they hide out, I understand. I haven't found any."

Sheba, her curiosity aroused, glanced in several cages.

"Chameleon," she said, "some of these animals are dead. Did they die from neglect?"

"Not in most cases. Some couldn't adapt to shipboard captivity. They died. The scientists preserved them as records of their findings, in case no others in the species were found elsewhere. I worked here, for a time, as an aide."

"How'd you wind up here?" Sheba asked.

"Transfer from a foundry ship. I . . . I got into a spot of trouble on that ship. What abilities I had, according to fleet

tests, were useful here . . . and elsewhere on the *Eureka*."

"You seem to make a career out of getting into scrapes," Apollo commented, drawing an embarrassed smile from Chameleon.

"Well, yes, I suppose. Not in the same league with you fighter pilots when it comes to scrapes, though."

"I see your point," Apollo said, returning the smile.

"I don't," Croft protested. "What is it with you guys? You know each other from somewhere, that's clear."

"It's a long story, Croft," Apollo said.

"I ask questions, everybody always tells me it's a long story."

"Well, it is."

"And we've got to figure out what to do now," Sheba said. "Should we work our way back to the shuttle?"

Apollo shrugged.

"We can try, though we'll need weapons. I suspect they've got the shuttle pretty well guarded by now. Still, they *are* inexperienced. The four of us might pull it off."

A voice whispered darkly from somewhere beyond the apelike animal's cage.

"Would it help if you had an even dozen . . . to pull it off with?"

A short black man with a benign kindly face stepped out of the darkness and swung down from the cage-pedestal. From the shadows several other people emerged. Most of them seemed to be dressed in lab smocks over conventional clothing.

"Perhaps we can help," the short man said. "We're not trained warriors, by any means, but we've had a taste of combat, and we're willing to fight. Hello, Chameleon."

"Professor Branch," Chameleon said.

"You know this man, Chameleon?" Apollo asked.

"He's my boss," Chameleon replied.

Apollo studied the group. They were certainly a mixed lot. Men and women of quite different ages and sizes. A motley crew, at best. How could they possibly be useful?

CHAPTER SEVEN

"You look a little green around the face-bolts, mate," Crutch remarked to Lucifer. "Are you well?"

"Of course. It is impossible for me to be sick. I am just a bit overwhelmed by you people and your ship."

All around them the aliens worked frenetically. Their equipment had no real logic to it, Lucifer thought. It looked like it had been thrown together from found objects in a junkyard. It was bent, beat-up, scarred from use. Still, the aliens in their awkward way utilized the devices quite effectively. As far as he could tell, they were tracking another ship. A squarish dark blip on a pale nearly white screen seemed the object of their immediate attention. He wondered if soon they would attempt to use his abilities for their own benefit. He was designed to serve. In one way or another he would always be a slave, it seemed. First, to the Cylons, now to these aliens, in the future to whom?

" 'Tis a bit of a mess, ain't it?" Crutch remarked, the gesture of his two left arms taking in the anarchy on command bridge. "We seen a lot of order in our travels. I say, who needs it? Order's just as messy as mess, you ask me. Every society I ever seen that believed in order had no character, I like to tell you. Everybody had everything in the right place, and their minds were turned off. Well, clip my strips, that's no way to live. We got most of our best study-subjects from orderly worlds."

"Study? You're involved in study?"

"Sure. This is a research ship."

"I thought it was a pirate ship."

Crutch's gestures were so expansive Lucifer had to duck a number of emphatic hand-sweeps.

"Well, o' course it's that, too. A pirate ship whose plunder is living beings. We load 'em up, take 'em back home, get a good price for 'em, I like to tell you. The consortium is particularly fond of humanoids, but I think we can get a pretty fee for you two ironheads, too."

Crutch's insulting remarks were delivered so casually that Lucifer hardly noticed them. When Baltar referred to him by a pejorative name, he didn't like it, but Crutch was a different kind of fool from Baltar.

"What will your consortium do with us? With them?"

"I'm not free to say that. But it's better'n you think, tell you that. I'll bet you're not pleased, sonny."

"Not precisely."

"Nope. Nobody ever is, at first. But you'll see, we're not a malicious race, we Image Lords."

"Image Lords, that's what you call yourselves?"

"You bet your boot-hinges. We are a superior race."

"You don't act like one. Attacking lone ships, bucking us about, enslaving peoples."

Something like a gleeful expression twisted Crutch's strange facial features.

"Well," he said, "I be split, you gotta be one o' us to know our superiority. I'd think a computer creature like you'd know sump'n as simple as that."

"It was clear to me, sir," Spectre said.

Spectre had been hovering in the background, listening to the conversation. And of course he had chosen his moment to interrupt. Lucifer was sick of watching Spectre butter up their enslaver. There was only so much he could accept from a fellow member of the Cylon IL series.

"Are you the captain of this ship?" Lucifer asked.

Crutch's version of bellowing laughter was a sound that would have frightened children of all species.

"Bless my strips, no. There's no captain here. We all work in unison, and there are no leaders. Leadership is a sign of limitation. Like what I was tellin' you before, you got to be superior to know superior."

Lucifer wondered how the Cylon Imperious Leader, a threebrained being who considered himself the finest representative of the most advanced race in the universe, would respond to Crutch's claim of superiority. He would certainly never agree with the idea that the Cylons were inferior to this race of ugly creatures, and he would have been offended by Crutch's opinions on leadership. Cylons believed in leadership. They adhered to a more rigid hierarchy than any other race they had ever discovered in the universe.

"I do not understand," Lucifer said. "You mentioned a consortium before. Aren't the members of that consortium your leaders?"

"Well, my bonny ironhead, you must sharpen your metal tongue with a rasp. The consortium makes our decisions, yes, but its members are not our leaders. We may despise imposed order, but we're not so ignorant we don't believe in systems."

"A fine distinction, to be sure."

"You just run it through your own system while we attend to business."

"Business?" Spectre asked, his interest piqued.

"Yep. We've gone and located another ship in this sector. More adventure, fellows. Get out your grappling hooks. Our detection scan shows many humanoids aboard, a bumper crop. We're gonna go back home with our holds full. A profitable venture, my lads, a profitable venture."

Spectre rolled closer to Crutch, saying, "You're attacking soon?"

"You can bet your circuit protection switch on that, mate."

"Interesting."

Lucifer found himself an alcove away from Spectre to watch the ship's crew gradually raise their activity to combat levels. Weapons were broken out of storage and passed around. Speeches, apparently inspirational ones, were made by several crew members.

He knew now that he wanted to escape from these aliens. He couldn't envision being under their control, no matter how superior they might be. He could not bear to be among them for the rest of his probably eternal existence.

While she monitored the flight of the intruder ship, Hera's thoughts were often on Starbuck. She'd been surprised to find him so reluctant to respond to her. Perhaps directness, a quality quite important to Vaileans, had to be subdued and controlled when dealing with the people of the *Galactica*. Still, she didn't think she could resort to the kind of devious romantic trickery Starbuck employed himself. And she hated the idea that she should stay in the background, demure and patient, waiting for Starbuck to make his move. If she wanted him, she should be able to arrange it on her terms, not wait for his.

The intruder ship was now close enough to put on more detailed scan. She brought it into such sharp focus she could make out the markings on the ship's side. She checked its course coordinates and found what she had been suspecting for some time.

"Lieutenant Starbuck!"

Starbuck sounded amused.

"You can drop the military formalities when we're in deep space, Cadet."

"Starbuck, I've been following the courses of both the *Eureka* and the unidentified ship. There's something."

"What?"

"Looks like the intruder is heading straight for the *Eureka*. And, Starbuck?"

"Yes."

"The markings on the side of the new ship. I could be wrong, but I could swear they're an old form of the piracy symbol."

"Pirates? You think they're pirates?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good work, Hera."

The cadet side of Hera was thrilled with her squadron leader's approval.

"What should we do?" she asked. "Try and intercept the pirate vessel?"

"No, I don't think so. We'll intervene when we have to. Let's wait and see what they do."

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Apollo had expected, the *Galactica* shuttle was, indeed, heavily guarded. It stood in the middle of the *Eureka's* landing bay with a ring of guards around it, and many other mutineers milling about.

Apollo and Croft crouched behind a pile of supply crates and surveyed the situation. In the corridor behind them, the others awaited their signal. Apollo wondered if he should give it. Branch and his renegade scientists were brave, but their inexperience might be fatal against these numbers. Their earlier exploits against the mutineers had been successful, but sabotage in the dark by a dedicated resistance group was radically different from a frontal assault on armed warriors by a motley band of marauders. Still, they had had a well-stocked cache of arms and explosives, filched during their many sneak attacks.

Apollo heard a couple of sounds from the corridor, but by and large the creatures which the scientists had freed from their cages were remarkably quiet. Apollo had originally been against bringing the animals at all, but Chameleon had argued well for his plan. Any plan, Apollo felt, was better than no plan, after all.

"Lotta firepower out there," Croft whispered. "Almost every bozo out there is armed. Formidable, Apollo, formidable."

"Maybe it's lucky we have help. We'd have trouble taking them, just us alone."

"Not sure our help can even do the trick."

"But we'll try."

"Your play, Captain."

Croft couldn't hide his sarcasm, even though he felt it was useless just now. He had a lifetime of being outspoken; it

was difficult to stop now.

"Well," Croft said, "should we begin?"

"Things aren't going to get any better out there. You ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Apollo took a deep breath then, by raising his arm, sent the prearranged signal to Sheba, who knelt at the corridor entrance. She said something over her shoulder to the small group behind her, and everyone tensed, ready. Chameleon, at the rear of the group, made a sign to a third contingent well down the corridor.

Apollo whispered to Croft, "Count to five . . . now!"

Gazing at each other's lips, the two quickly counted to five, then they ran to the wall near the crates and pressed their bodies against it. Everyone in the corridor spread themselves against the wall. In the darkness behind them there was a mild animal grunt, then a growl, then a roar, then a clangor of howls, squawks, and yelps. Out of the shadows, stirred to action and stampeded by the scientists behind them, came the animals taken from the lab. They were a strange-looking herd, all sizes and shapes, all moving their legs differently but pushed forward by the surge of the entire throng. They were led by a gargantuan and scaly two-legged, six-armed beast from a small unnamed desert planet in uncharted territory. It was colored a deep blue and was normally the gentlest of beings. Croft saw a burran, a hefty equine animal used as a beast of burden on his home planet of Scorpius, and the tiny almost emaciated Konchee, whose normal habitat was icy mountains where its tendrillike digits could grasp the smallest of overhangings in order to get to the out-of-the-way places where it could dig out its insect food supply. Most of the animals, however, were a mixed lot whose names and origins were unknown to him.

As the odd animal herd roared by them, Apollo and Croft felt strange fur, bumps, warts, and who knew what else brush by them. Running with the stragglers at the rear, Apollo and Croft joined the herd. The herd turned out to be, as Chameleon had suggested, a perfect cover for getting far into the landing bay without being detected.

"Smells like a plowed field in here already," Croft remarked.

Apollo, as they followed the animals through the astonished ranks of the mutineers, signaled backward and shouted: "*Now!*"

Apollo's motley army came roaring out of the corridor, their ranks looking not much different from the stampeding animals in front of them. Led by Sheba, who waved her arms frantically to direct them, they leaped over crates and flung themselves into the landing bay.

The mutineers, preoccupied by the sudden appearance of a herd of bizarre stampeding animals, did not perceive the human intruders. Apollo and Croft were more than halfway to the shuttle before they had to fire a shot. Both Chameleon and Sheba had nearly caught up with them, with the motley crew, still mostly in soiled lab smocks, to the rear.

Apollo took a bead on the apparent leader of the shuttle's guards, and fired. The man grabbed at his chest and fell. In the confusion nobody noticed his fall. The attackers got off several more shots before the mutineers returned any fire.

"Apollo!" Croft screamed. "Watch out!"

Apollo ducked just in time to miss having his head sheared off. The shot set some fur burning on an adjacent rodentlike but large mammal who didn't even notice the small conflagration on his back. Croft, sweeping his arm across the animal's fur, quickly put out the fire.

"Nice," Apollo commented, as he dropped another of the mutineer guards.

"Always be kind to animals," Croft said, while shooting wildly all around him.

Soon the landing bay was in such chaos that Apollo began to doubt the wisdom of the attack. He'd lost sight of Croft. Except for Sheba, a few meters to his right, he couldn't see any of his team. All he could see was animals. Fur swirled all around him, and the odor of seared flesh was nearly overpowering. He stumbled over a fallen animal, a lizardlike being whose throat had been torn open by laser fire. For a moment he regretted the loss to science of one of the preserved species. His feelings almost cost him his life as a mutineer took aim at him. The shot would have caught him in the chest but Sheba saw the man in time and got her shot in first. The man fell under the hooves of one of the stampeding animals.

Apollo didn't even have time to nod thanks, as he wildly plunged forward, looking almost indistinguishable from the charging beasts. He didn't even see how close he'd been to the shuttle when a shove from a large animal rammed him against its side. He was dizzy for a moment but recovered quickly. Scrambling to the shuttle hatch, he threw it open. A trio of guards rushed at him, but he fired three rapid shots, and they were down. Looking behind him, he marveled at the fierceness and tumult of the battle.

He waved toward his motley army and shouted, "Into the shuttle. Everybody!"

As he started into the shuttle he was thrown off his feet by a sudden throbbing blast. Even as he picked himself up, he had calculated that the rocking explosion couldn't have come from any weapon in the landing bay. It sounded like a direct hit on the *Eureka* itself.

Another explosion and he was thrown backward, against Sheba, who was just coming into the shuttle. He fell on top of her.

As they struggled to their feet, Sheba said, "What was that?"

"Either the ship just hit something or we're under attack."

"Vipers? To the rescue?"

"Maybe. But I don't think—"

The next hit was a damaging one. The landing bay vibrated. Frightened animals shrieked, howled, and stampeded even more, falling over themselves, sliding along the floor, bumping against the walls. An alert klaxon sounded. Responding to it, many of the mutineers left the battle, shouting something about attack.

"C'mon," Apollo muttered. "This confusion's going to help us escape."

The scientists started pouring into the shuttle, their movements nearly as chaotic as the stampeding animal herd's. Chameleon jumped in with his usual elegance.

Apollo and Sheba rapidly took their places at the shuttle's controls, and got the craft roaring into life. Chameleon settled himself into a seat just behind them.

"Is everybody in?" Apollo shouted.

"I didn't see Croft," Chameleon said.

"He can take care of himself."

"We can't leave him behind," Sheba protested.

"We don't have the time to—"

"There he is!" Sheba screamed.

Apollo looked out the side portal and saw Croft on the back of one of the larger animals, a burran from Scorpius. His left hand clutched a clump of long fur and, kneeling the burran in its side, he urged it forward. Some of the remaining mutineers shot at him, and he downed a couple of them with the lasergun held in his other hand. Yelping, he made the burran charge toward the shuttle. As it reached

the craft, the burran reared and tossed Croft sideways, off its back. Croft hit the deck, somersaulted, and dived through the hatchway into the shuttle.

Getting to his feet, he said, "Thought you could leave without me? No such luck, Captain."

Apollo swung the shuttle around, sending mutineers diving out of its way. He taxied it forward toward the massive landing bay entrance, to take it out the way it had come in.

"Okay," he said, "let's get this baby out of here!"

Accelerating, they plunged through the force-field membrane at the landing bay entrance, and swooped outward. Apollo immediately saw the small crafts from the pirate ship swarming in large numbers through the sky, sending grappling hooks over the *Eureka*. They had already secured the area the shuttle flew in.

"My God!" Apollo yelled.

Ahead of the shuttle were the crisscrossed lines of a lasernet, a wall of laser beams generated by several buoy-relays the small craft had already set in place outside the *Eureka*.

"Can we crash through that?" Sheba asked.

"No," Apollo glumly replied. He swerved the shuttle just in time to avoid the lasernet, which would have sliced the shuttle, broken it up into fragments, and sent its passengers and crew careening into space. He decelerated the shuttle and headed back the way they'd come.

"Can't you find a way out?" Croft said.

"No," Apollo answered. "We'd just burn up along with the shuttle."

"What'll we do?" Sheba asked.

"Go back into the *Eureka*."

"Nice flying, anyway, Apollo," Croft said.

Apollo smiled but kept quiet. Chameleon squirmed in his chair and said, "It's like being between the devil and . . . and . . ."

"And a hard place, old man," Croft said, "a hard place."

CHAPTER NINE

Tigh, his face puzzled, left the communications area of the bridge and hurried to Adama. His left hand clutched a sheet of the thin, nearly transparent type of paper on which fleet messages were recorded.

"Dispatch from Lieutenant Starbuck, sir. Just came in over the coded channel."

Adama turned slowly. His worries were displayed for all to read on his wrinkled sad-eyed face.

"And?" he asked,

"It's hard to understand, Adama."

"Out with it, Tigh."

Tigh held the message out for Adama to see for himself.

"It seems the *Eureka* has been attacked by pirates," he said.

Adama's daughter Athena, who had been monitoring fleet flight patterns on a limited-range scanner, was distracted by the import of Tigh's statement. She stood up from her console and went to her father's side.

"Pirates?" Adama was saying. "Is Starbuck concocting another of his jokes?"

"No joke, sir," Tigh said, and Athena nodded agreement. "I don't think even Starbuck would pull a joke in a situation like this."

"It's not his style," Athena said.

"What more does he say?" Adama asked.

"The pirate ship was detected by a cadet flyer, one Hera, and was then tracked by our squadron. It homed in on the *Eureka* and mounted an attack against it. The *Eureka* was subdued almost immediately. Starbuck reports he thought

he saw our shuttle briefly emerge from the *Eureka*, then return when it was faced with a lasernet. There was no time to make contact with anyone in the shuttle. Starbuck requests advice on whether or not to attack now."

"Did he reveal his own inclination in the matter?"

"Yes. He's still cautious because he doesn't know the whereabouts of Apollo and the others, or even which ship they are in presently."

To himself Adama cursed the *Eureka* mutineers for their damnfool rebellion. He'd sent out so many directives which emphasized the necessity for the ships of the fleet to remain together, and had often pointed out that a lone vessel was a target for Cylons or any other scapegraces haunting the space-lanes. Now, the *Eureka* was serving as an unfortunate example of his cautions. It was really tempting to send Starbuck and his squadron up against the pirate ship but, not knowing what kind of being inhabited the vessel, it was just too dangerous an action.

"Instruct Starbuck to maintain pursuit until his discretionary power allows an opening he can use," Adama said sternly.

"Yes, sir."

Tigh crumpled up the paper and strode off the bridge. Athena took her father's arm and started walking with him. Next to them, through the giant starfield window, they could see hosts of stars, in clumps and gatherings or alone and isolated.

"Before duty, I stopped in at Boxey's room," Athena said softly. "Poor kid, he's really in a dither. He knows his father's a hostage now. I tried to keep it from him, but—"

"That's all right, Athena. What did he say?"

"What usually bothers him. He can't bear the possibility of losing his father. He says he's already lost his real parents

back on Caprica, and then his adopted mother Serina, and it seems whenever he's happy Apollo gets himself into some new scrape."

Adama rubbed the back of his hand along one cheek and realized he hadn't shaved since the hostage episode began. His tough wiry whiskers felt like they were scarring the skin of his knuckles.

"It's not easy being a warrior's child," he said.

Athena smiled.

"Don't I know that, though?" she said.

Her remark caught Adama off guard. He peered at his daughter affectionately.

"I gave you a lot of anxiety over the years, didn't I?" he said.

"Me, and Apollo, too. We couldn't wait until we were old enough to join the war effort so we could be with you. God, Apollo's got to come back. We can't lose him to some scurvy mutinous—"

"Easy, easy. He'll come back. He always does."

"It only has to happen once."

She felt him drawing back from her. She usually said one thing too many, it seemed. Now was no exception.

Starbuck had ordered all commcircuit channels opened for a squadron conference. It seemed as if he could hear the breathing of several pilots in his ears.

"Boomer," he said, "what do you think they're up to?"

"Looks to me like they're mooring the *Eureka* to their ship. They're gonna pull it along."

"Why in Kobol would they do that?"

"I guess the *Eureka's* their prize."

"It's a good thing," chimed in Bojay.

"Good? Why?" Starbuck asked.

"Takes a lot of power to pull a ship the size of the *Eureka* along. If they had far to go, they'd just take the best of the plunder aboard and leave the *Eureka* behind, as a derelict. They want the ship."

"Yeah," Boomer said. "I think Bojay's on to something. Wherever they're heading for now, it must be close by."

"I get the point," Starbuck said.

"Starbuck?" Ensign Giles said.

"Yo, Giles."

"I could surprise 'em. You know, drop in on 'em and blast at the anchorings of the lasernet. I think I'd have it disconnected from the *Eureka* before they knew what happened."

Ensign Giles, a short feisty young man, was known for his daring, both in combat and in romantic matters. Some wagsters aboard the *Galactica* referred to him as the mini-Starbuck.

"And they'd have you in their sights and blown away before you could execute a good loop. No, don't think so, Giles. Thanks for the offer."

"But what'll we do?"

"Just hang in there, Giles, just hang in there."

After the conference, his ears filled with commcircuit static, Starbuck wondered how long they'd have to hang in there. It went against his nature to be so cautious. Caution was Boomer's specialty. Every nerve in Starbuck's body urged him to go on the attack immediately—blast the pirate ship into pieces only a miniaturist could sort, then dive in and rescue Apollo, and get the job done. But that was a fool's play. Whenever the chance came, he would be fierce. But the chance had to come.

The captives from the *Eureka* were being herded through a massive tube that connected their ship with the pirate vessel. Alien pirates, blobby repulsive creatures, stood on tall metal blocks along the way, urging their prisoners on, sometimes striking at them with a type of laserwhip whose lightninglike lashes could reach an impressive distance while ripping open cloth and leaving oddly straight burns on the skin of their victims.

A few of the pirates moved right along with the prisoners, pushing at them viciously.

"Get your hands off me, slug," Carome yelled and got a laserstroke across his shoulder for his insolence.

"Where are you taking us?" Apollo asked one of the aliens.

"No talking in the ranks," the alien answered and rudely shoved Apollo onward.

"These creatures are genuinely repulsive," Sheba whispered to Chameleon.

"I've seen better-looking objects growing moldy in a bowl of fruit," he muttered back.

Not far behind Chameleon, a pair of Borellian Nomen were keeping close watch on him.

"Is that him?" Maga asked Bora. "Is it Dimitri?"

"Or Chameleon," Bora responded. "His real name, as they told us. Brega and Lingk reported his presence on the *Eureka* to us, do you recall?"

Maga's heavy eyebrows came together in a frown and looked like a jagged hairy birthmark.

"Yes, I remember," he said. "The blood hunt is still unfulfilled. It leaves me with . . . with an empty feeling."

"But you ordered us to halt it."

"Yes, at the bidding of our captors on the *Galactica*. Well, we have new captors now."

"I see. What then is your plan, Maga?"

"Inform our people. The blood hunt is resumed. We will wait for our time, then spring."

Croft worked his way back to Carome, who was grimacing and holding on to his pained shoulder.

"See where your pitiful little mutiny has got us, Carome?"

"Shut up, Croft, you miserable—"

Croft guffawed and earned his own stroke of the laserwhip from one of the aliens on a platform. He winced, but would not remove the nasty smile from his face.

Crutch, together with Lucifer and Spectre, viewed on a monitor the transfer of the humanoids from the captured ship. Lucifer noted that Crutch seemed to derive special satisfaction from associating with ambulatory cybernetic sentients. He called them his two buddy robots.

"A ragged lot, if you ask me," Crutch said, staring at the prisoners shown on the monitor screen.

"Yes," Spectre said in his snobbish voice, "but few humans ever display anything like elegance."

"I'm rather partial to humans myself," Crutch said, shrugging.

Spectre performed his usual obsequious turnabout.

"Well, of course, exalted sir. They are a varied and unpredictable people. I adore them."

"I don't know as I'd go that far," mumbled Crutch.

"Well," he said, "I didn't mean exactly that I *adored* them. But they're—"

Lucifer, suddenly aroused by an image on the screen, interrupted Spectre's self-serving strategy.

"Wait! Uh, Mr. Crutch—sir—could you enlarge that picture? There?"

He pointed toward the center of the screen. A technician worked controls until the section of the picture Lucifer had requested was made larger and brought into focus.

"Is that better?" Crutch asked.

"Could you freeze on that area?" Lucifer asked.

Eventually, alone in the center of the screen, Apollo, Sheba, Croft, and Chameleon could be seen.

"That insignia," Lucifer said. "On the shoulder patches. It's the emblem of the *Galactica*. They are colonial warriors, that woman and that man."

He indicated Apollo and Sheba.

"Colonial warriors, eh?" Crutch said. "Is that good?"

"Well, yes. They are the sworn enemy of the Cylons."

"A mark in their favor, I must admit. I'd like to meet 'em."

Crutch clomped a few steps away and spoke with other crewmembers. Lucifer kept watch on the screen where, in a moment, he saw Apollo and his three companions yanked out of line. His attention wavered from the screen, and he soon saw the four humans being thrown onto the bridge deck at Crutch's feet, or at least the protuberances at the end of his legs. The humans sprang up, their limbs tense, their hands closed in fists, ready for any kind of threat.

"What's going on here?" Apollo asked.

"Simple, mate," Crutch replied. "You're our prisoners. You folk, and everybody else on that ship. And a good bunch of prizes, believe me. I hear you're from the *Galactica*."

Apollo, clearly astonished by the unexpected question, glanced quizzically toward his companions.

"You know about the *Galactica*?" he said.

"Never heard of ya before, sonny," Crutch bellowed. "Not until my oil-lubricated buddy over there informed me of your reputation." He gestured his two right arms in Lucifer's direction. "Seems you rate pretty high in his book."

Apollo had never seen Lucifer before and wondered what the bizarre standing construct of metal and cloth was.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't understand."

Lucifer glided forward, bowing his head slightly.

"Sir," he said, "I am acquainted with one of your pilots. Lieutenant Starbuck. My name is Lucifer."

Apollo, recognizing the name, could not contain his amusement.

"Lucifer! Yes, Starbuck's mentioned your name. You're the robot he met on Baltar's base-star."

"Please, sir, I am not a *robot*. I am an ambulatory sentient computer."

Apollo grinned. His grin, Lucifer noticed, was nearly as attractive as Starbuck's.

"As you wish," he said. "What are you doing here, Lucifer?"

"My plight is the same as yours, alas. I am a prisoner here."

"And Baltar. Is he—"

"No. I was on a different ship. Might I have the pleasure of knowing your identity, sir?"

"This's Captain Apollo," Croft said.

Lucifer couldn't have been more pleased.

"Apollo! Why, Starbuck mentioned your name often to me. Is he with you?"

"No, he isn't. I excused him from this mission, and his usual luck prevailed."

Lucifer did not indicate his disappointment that Starbuck wasn't among the prisoners as he and Apollo exchanged the

stories of their capture. While Apollo had already had a good idea of what Lucifer would look like, from Starbuck's description, he found himself fascinated by the disconcertingly asynchronous eyes that sent out intense red light. There was also a velvety smoothness in Lucifer's voice that he hadn't been prepared for.

On his part, Lucifer was impressed with Apollo. The human seemed reasonable and friendly. Lucifer suddenly felt a desire to meet the rest of the *Battlestar Galactica* gang—Boomer, Jolly, and the others whom Starbuck had mentioned in their conversations together. There had been many times in the past when Lucifer had realized that he admired humans, in spite of the Cylon-programmed antihuman attitudes. Except for the devious Baltar, Lucifer was comfortable with humans. As he had wondered often before, he speculated on whether he could be a turncoat, leave the Cylons and ally himself with the human cause. He could do it, he knew. He could reprogram himself for anything. As he considered joining the humans, he thought he felt a stirring in the area of his shoulder where his soul was housed.

"I enjoy old home week as much as the next homesick buccaneer," Crutch said, "but you fellows are supposed to be detained in the holding cells with the rest of the prisoners."

"Just what do you plan to do with us?" Apollo asked.

"Why, we're taking you home with us, of course."

"Home?" Sheba said.

"Yes, my lass. To our home. To The Joyful Land. You won't regret this trip, I can promise you."

"The Joyful Land?" Croft said. "Never heard of it."

Crutch's response was replete with good cheer and amiability.

"Very few have. Ours is the unknown paradise of the universe. That's the way we like it. We pick and choose our

own inhabitants, after all. Those of you who don't fit in will not stay. We're not a resort."

"Pick and choose?" Chameleon asked.

"The Joyful Land is populated by the beings we abduct from the starlanes and other planets. We are especially fond of humanoids."

"How charming," Chameleon muttered.

"Who are you people?" Sheba asked.

"We call ourselves the Image Lords. That is a rough translation into your language, of course. We provide living dreams. You will see. Now, off with you."

Crutch gestured toward the whip-wielding guards who then began herding the human visitors off the bridge.

Lucifer watched them go, then said quietly to himself, "Perhaps Captain Apollo plays cards, like Starbuck. Oh, I hope so."

Spectre, who heard the remark, was puzzled. He placed it in his memory file, with the highest call-up priority.

CHAPTER TEN

The odor of the Borellian Nomen's anger, the odor of the blood hunt, was heavy in the air. To a Noman it was an exciting smell, to others it was simply musky, even slightly sweet.

Within the small confines of their cell Maga and Bora couldn't pace too rapidly, but they'd worked out a pattern where they never collided with each other. Across the way, in another cell, the Nomen named Brega and Lingk also displayed an edginess uncharacteristic of the lumbering slow-moving Nomen. The cells, unlike the ones aboard the *Eureka*, were traditional, secured by doors with thick iron bars.

"Is it true, Maga?" Brega called across the corridor.

"Is what true, Brega?"

"That you have reinstated the blood hunt against this Chameleon?"

Maga stopped by his cell door and fiercely grabbed two iron bars.

"It is true."

The Nomen, disoriented to be so far away from their home colonies, felt inspired by the new blood trail. It made them feel good again, made them feel like Nomen. Maga resumed his pacing.

"How are we going to corner this Chameleon?" Bora asked. The ritual of the blood hunt required that the victim be isolated, at the hands of the Nomen, for a substantial period of time before he could be disposed of. Crowds tended to interfere, and Bora knew that Chameleon's friends would definitely not sit by and allow the Nomen to claim

Chameleon. "Chameleon has friends from the *Galactica* to hide him."

"Yes," Maga said ominously, "the *Galactica*. I do not fear them, even this rude Captain Apollo. We have reason for vengeance against that man, too, Bora."

Apollo had been the arresting officer who'd negotiated the release of their blood trail as a condition of their freedom.

"I agree," Bora said. He didn't like anybody from the *Galactica*. "Should I get the chance, I will see that he dies."

"But first, Chameleon. It is the code."

Together they crossed their arms across their chests, the vow of the blood hunt.

"It is the code," Bora said.

Each then ritually touched the laser boles which were attached to the crossed belts on their chests. The Nomen were the only prisoners who had retained their weapons, simply because the aliens did not recognize the boles as weapons, thinking they were some sort of gaudy decoration.

In another cell, Apollo, Croft, and Chameleon displayed more calm than the Nomen. Apollo sat on the bunk, while Croft leaned casually against the cell door and Chameleon stood with his right leg resting on the seat of a chair.

"Somehow I always seem to wind up in a cell," Croft commented bitterly. "My destiny."

"Professor Branch says we're only centons away from arrival on the home planet of these aliens," Chameleon said.

Both Croft and Apollo stared quizzically at the handsome elderly man.

"Chameleon," Apollo said, "you've been with us in this cell all the time. We haven't seen Branch since the alien attack. How can you know anything he says?"

"He's been sending messages. Tapping against the bars of cells. Others have relayed them. You mean you haven't noticed?"

"I heard the taps," Croft said, "thought everybody was edgy, never picked out a code of any kind."

"It's an old code, used in prisons back in the twelve worlds. On Caprica, at least. Prisoners developed it as a way of communicating without their captors knowing."

"In all my prison time, never heard of it. Hey, you've been in the jug, too. Done a little time, have you, old man?"

Chameleon took his leg off the chair and, obviously disturbed by Croft's rude question, looked off to the side.

"I've . . . been incarcerated," he said, "once or twice. Unjustly, of course."

"Oh, of course. Me, too. I don't know who planted that loot on me."

Croft's laugh was sarcastic. Chameleon seemed about to reply, then he clearly thought better of bantering with a man whose prison experience with banter was extensive.

After a few microns, Chameleon said in a quiet voice, "No, I was guilty, too. I have some . . . some skill as a con man."

"Some skill?" Apollo remarked. "A lot of skill, if you ask me."

"Well," Croft said, turning away and looking out through the bars, "con us off this ship, old man."

The next moments were uneasy, each of the men a little nervous at the resentment that Croft had suddenly brought into the cell. Finally, Chameleon said to Apollo, "How is Star—Lieutenant Starbuck these days?"

"Last I saw him," Apollo said, smiling, "he was having romantic problems."

Chameleon returned Apollo's smile.

"What else is new?"

"Right. Otherwise, he's still the same feisty, slippery, charming son of a sea-skunk he's always been. And a great hero, incidentally."

Croft, his anger dissipated, turned around and addressed Chameleon, "You know Starbuck, too, old man?"

"He's my—yes, I know the young man well enough."

Apollo's brow furrowed as he noted Chameleon's hesitancy.

"Starbuck told me he hasn't visited you recently," Apollo said. "I thought the two of you were getting together regularly."

"We were. When I was on the senior ship he shuttled over often, between missions. But I grew tired of being on the senior ship and Siress Blassie was, well . . ."

Apollo nodded. "Yes," he said, "I've heard a little about the siress. Not the woman to control a restless wanderer, I'd say."

Chameleon's grin had several secrets in it.

"You do know her. And me, for that matter." His gestures as he spoke were smooth and elegant. "It was a luxurious life there, with a lot of old people making the best of a controlled existence. Contributing to the fleet with their sewing, freeze-food preparation, bandage rolling, and other useful activities. And Siress Blassie's lot was better than the average on that ship. But I found myself dozing off in the middle of a utility period, feeling enervated when I exerted myself just a little bit. In short, feeling old. Last thing I wanted to do was feel old."

"I think I noticed that in you, Chameleon," Apollo said. Chameleon noticed the warmth in the young man's voice, and wished he could hear Starbuck talk to him that way again.

"So one day," Chameleon continued, "I got fed up with the senior ship and stowed away in a supply shuttle. I managed to finagle positions aboard a couple of fleet ships before I found my way to the *Eureka*—with forged scientific credentials. I had to assume a role because the siress had arranged for agents to come looking for me. I had a couple of close calls. Under the circumstances, it was unwise of me to attempt communication with my—with Starbuck."

Again Apollo noticed Chameleon's stuttering when he referred to Starbuck.

"I can see," Apollo said.

"I'm sorry about it," Chameleon said. "I would have liked to talk with Starbuck one more time. I'm sorry I didn't. There's something I wanted to tell Starbuck. I wish I had."

Starbuck's leg muscles had stiffened from the long centons in the cockpit of his Viper. Fuel was getting low, too. The squadron couldn't afford to fly around this star system idly for much longer. He tried to do isometric exercises as he waited for Colonel Tigh to come on line. When Tigh's cool voice asked for Starbuck's report, the young lieutenant replied just as coolly.

"The pirate ship has docked above the fifth planet of the star system, Colonel. Other ships have left the surface to rendezvous with it. A lot of activity, sir."

"Any sign of Apollo, Sheba . . .?"

"No way to tell. If they're shuttling prisoners to the surface, there must be a multitude of them, judging by the number of small craft going to and fro. But they're there somewhere, and I'm going in to find out."

"Going in?"

"Yes, it's the best way. What else can we do? We can always fly rings around any detection devices they may

have. Then we'll be on the ground to take a look-see. There appears to be a large city near the spaceport the small craft originates from. We're going to be tourists, if necessary."

"Is that advisable, Starbuck?"

"Well, we can do that. Or we can fly orbits around this miserable planet waiting for something to happen. Or we can return to the *Galactica* and continue our journey without Apollo."

"I get your drift, Lieutenant. Good luck."

After the line to the *Galactica* went dead, Starbuck muttered, "Luck's what it's all about, Colonel."

After a few moments of crackling sounds in his ears, Hera's voice spoke suddenly.

"Starbuck?"

Hera's was not the voice he wanted to hear just then.

"Yes?"

"I want to be on the mission to the planet's surface."

"Hera! What do you know about that? First time I mentioned it was to Colonel Tigh, and that was just now on the private command frequency."

There was no response.

"Cadet Hera?"

"Well . . . I just patched in and listened."

"What? You patched in?"

"Well, yes."

"You can't patch into a coded channel. That's what the coding is for, to prevent eavesdropping. How in the holy pyramids of Kobol did you do it?"

"First I triangulated on the transmission code, then I worked through several combinations, then I—"

"Okay, okay, never mind. Maybe I don't want to know. Keep your ears away from private channels, Cadet."

Hera sounded abashed, properly disciplined.

"Yes, sir . . . Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Am I going?"

Starbuck sighed.

"I don't know how I could do it without you."

Hera whooped with glee.

"Good!"

"Who else can keep you out of trouble?"

"I didn't quite get that, Starbuck."

"Well, you'll just have to patch in better, won't you? Keep your eye on the scanner and your ear off my voice, hear?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

It had been easy to grant her permission to join the landing mission. He was going to order the whole squadron to the surface, anyway. They couldn't afford to waste any more fuel, and it was a reasonable alternative to sending most of the squadron back to the *Galactica*.

He inspected the ranks of the squadron to the left and right of him. *We're an awesome sight*, he thought, *I know that. And we are awesome fighters. But can we pull this one off? Can we get Apollo and the others back? Can I get my father back? It's us against a planetful of whoever we're up against.*

His stiff legs started to throb with pain and he had to shift to a more comfortable position. There were few comfortable positions within a Viper cockpit.

You can bet on us. A sure thing.

Easy, when you got luck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In The Joyful Land there were no beings more constantly joyful than the Image Lords themselves, especially during work hours. They worked in several control rooms scattered throughout the city, the prison compound, and the secret grimy underground areas where they spent their off-duty time. In each control room a different sector of the city was supervised, with its citizens securely under the blunt yellow padded thumbs of the Image Lords. The city they controlled was the only settlement on the surface of the planet.

The city was called Euphoria, and its inhabitants were mostly humanoid. The Image Lords had an especial fondness for humanoids, which was why pirate crews were always delighted when they came upon a lone human ship. Other races, such as the dreaded Cylons were bad subjects.

An Image Lord working his controls was, in spite of a certain warty ugliness, positively radiant with happiness and enthusiasm as his several hands flew over the controls of his machine. As he worked, he chattered effervescently with equally delighted co-workers. Image Lords excitedly informed each other of newly discovered manipulations. An important part of their tasks was the planning out of schemes in which they could combine their trapped subjects to work out elaborate and even choreographic machinations. While chattering, an Image Lord rarely looked at his co-workers, preferring to keep his attention on individual monitors, with occasional glances at the monitors of other Image Lords when something new and unusual was happening.

In one room, located in the multidomed building where the citizens came every evening for the Summoning, the Image Lords had lost some of their energy. It had been a routine day so far, and there was nothing Image Lords hated more

than routine. They liked to create routine, toy with it, change it around, but they despised the day-to-day stuff that they were required to maintain in order to lend a semblance of normality to their subjects' lives. In this control room, however, there'd been enough of that kind of routine for one work period. An Image Lord started chortling and outlining his plot to his colleagues, who gleefully concurred. He returned to his console and poised his four arms above the controls.

On the screen in front of him a man sat at a desk, writing. As with all else in the work lives of the citizens of Euphoria, the man was writing worthless nonsense. But, since he didn't know it was nonsense, and since it was his job, he kept at it with a studied concentration. Like the aliens, the humans of the city performed their work with vigor.

In the control room, the Image Lord's fingers started to work controls rapidly, flipping toggles, pressing buttons, turning dials, patting coded touchplates, sliding levers—in short, performing his tasks with the kind of charged efficiency that was characteristic of an Image Lord initiating a variant. His co-workers, at his signal, would join him and add their own orchestrations to his grand design.

The man at the desk was a handsome dark-skinned man with pale brown eyes that, in spite of the energy he was devoting to his writing, seemed a bit vacant. Most humans who had been in Euphoria for a long time tended to develop vacant expressions. While he wrote, buzzers rang and whistles whistled. The sounds were dispatched by the Image Lords. Each noise changed his activity in some way. A buzzer, and he switched pens. A whistle, and he opened his shirt. Another buzzer, and he mussed up his hair. Another whistle, and he put his leg up on the desk.

The aliens, who particularly enjoyed small displays, looked on delightedly.

A sudden loud buzz caused the man to pick up a box that contained paper fasteners and toss it idly in the air. The Image Lord controlling him chortled and flipped a toggle. In the room a staccato whistle led the man to grab a bottle of writing liquid and add it to the box in his almost-distracted juggling. Soon the Image Lord had caused him to juggle three objects with one hand while he wrote with the other. His fellow aliens got quite a kick out of the show. Then the controller abruptly banged a button and the man ceased his juggling, drawing his hand away from the trio of desk objects. They fell. The bottle of writing liquid rolled across the desk and spilled darkly onto the man's paper. He kept on writing. His controller jiggled a toggle and the man picked up the dripping paper and wiped his face with it, leaving blotchy black stains against the darkness of his skin. It looked like he'd developed a sudden disease. The aliens all loved it, and chortled with glee.

At another signal the man meticulously set the paper back onto the desk, smoothed it out, and resumed his writing. After a loud long ring, he dropped the pen and turned to a screen sitting next to his desk. Bright light in many colors, emanating from the screen, entranced him.

After a few moments of the light flickering off his writing-liquid blemishes, he abruptly stood up and left the room. The alien controller tracked him as he left his building and inspected the street outside, where traffic and pedestrians were moving smoothly. Most of the vehicles in the roadway were five-wheeled and open. Some of the walkers were moving rapidly, clearly on errands of some sort. Others were slower, stopping often to peer into the display windows of shops.

The controller gave the signal for his co-workers to join in. Their voices rumbling in an almost sensual rapture, the other aliens attacked their consoles with a frenetic energy. The chaos in the control room was quickly duplicated in the

street. Cars went out of control, crashing into buildings, narrowly missing people on the sidewalks. Two cars ran into each other and each looped backward, landing neatly on their tires, their drivers and passengers smiling. Some people got into fights, and not ordinary fistfights either. Battlers flipped other battlers over their backs. Others swung their opponents around by their arms, lifting their legs off the ground. Other people merely stood and shouted at each other, while a few exuberant people raced around, destroying any object they could get their hands on.

As the chaos reigned, the Image Lords watched their collectively created show intently and bobbed up and down in their seats ecstatically. When the events had reached a certain anticipated intensity, they resumed jiggling and twisting their controls to change the street scene.

Where anger and ugliness had been before, there was suddenly peace and love. Those who'd fallen as the result of blows or collisions picked themselves up, dusted off their clothing, and smiled. Cars whose snouts were up against the buildings backed up into the street and joined a new line of orderly traffic. People began to look sexily at each other, smiling the goofy smile of people on the make. The aliens' console activity accelerated their many arms, creating a room-wide blur hovering over the controls. Soon the people in the streets were running to each other, many of them emerging from cars and stalling the traffic. In an impressive logistical display everybody on the street, except for the younger children, found somebody to smooch with. The sweat of passion speckled foreheads, and there was a general smell of lust in the air.

A general order reached the alien controllers from the consortium, and they were forced to interrupt their inventions. The romance in the street suddenly stopped. People immediately formed orderly lines and ranks, the lines and ranks of a parade. Sometimes walking over vehicles,

they paraded through the city streets. Some groups sang, others rumbled in a rhythmic mutter. Pride was on everyone's face.

The parade ended in an open field outside Euphoria, where the paraders broke ranks and formed new patterns: circles, spirals, and more complicated designs. The aliens, working furiously, were outdoing themselves, at least according to their own demanding standards of aesthetic manipulation. The human mosaiclike tapestry, when viewed from the descending shuttle, was quite impressive.

The shuttle landed in an open area in what appeared to be the exact center of the human tapestry. As the doors of the ship opened, the people fell to the ground, maintaining linked patterns.

Led by their alien captors, Apollo and Chameleon were the first humans to emerge from the shuttle.

"What is this?" Apollo said when he saw the vast assemblage of prone human beings.

Crutch, standing just behind Apollo, said, "We like to greet newcomers with a touch of ceremony, Captain."

"A touch? This is ridiculous. What's the point?"

Crutch, genuinely perplexed, waved his arms nervously.

"Point? Must there be a point, mate? We are just bringing a little beauty into your drab lives. That's what the Image Lords strive for. A little beauty, some drama, a bit o' the dancin' and singin' without which existence would be pretty miserable, don't you think?"

Apollo shrugged, his face dour.

"I don't know what to think. I don't really understand."

Crutch's voice lowered, and almost seemed gentle and friendly.

"Well, you'll be trained," he said.

"Trained?" Apollo said.

"Some training is involved, yes. Beings don't respond to our methods automatically, after all. Some conditioning is involved."

"Conditioning?"

"You do ask a pretty bunch of questions, don't you? We prefer conditioning to technical implantation. We don't like the side effects of technical or even chemical manipulation of our little charges. But you'll see. No, ask no more questions now."

On the field, the tapestry unthreaded, and the citizens walked slowly back to the city.

The prisoners from the shuttle were herded into groups which were then led across the field toward the aliens' ramshackle prison compound.

In the middle of one clump of prisoners, Croft and Sheba strode.

"If we can choose our own roommates," Croft whispered into her ear, "like to be mine, lovely?"

The disgust on Sheba's face would have reduced most men to quivering rodents. Croft, however, was not easily diverted from a goal.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Your line—it's worse than anything women are subjected to by Starbuck. And that's pretty low, Croft."

"I take that as a compliment."

Sheba, feeling revulsion, tried unsuccessfully to edge away from Croft, but her shoulders couldn't make a dent in the surrounding crowd.

In another group, Maga and Bora kept their vigil on Chameleon.

"When should we make our move, Maga?"

"Patience. If we kill him now, it will draw the attention of both our captors and our fellow prisoners."

A few meters ahead of the Nomen, in the same group of prisoners, Chameleon walked beside Apollo. The many lines of his wrinkled forehead were deep with worry.

"Don't like the look of this at all," he muttered to Apollo.

"Me, either. We're getting out of this, soon as possible."

"With what? We have no weapons, we'll be imprisoned, we're on a planet none of us ever heard of before . . ."

"We'll find a way."

"Starbuck used to tell me you were the bravest of a brave lot."

"Starbuck's a pretty brave specimen himself. The two of us, I guess we make a good fighting team."

Chameleon wiped his eyes, a gesture designed to conceal tears welling up in them. Con men never cared to be seen with tears in their eyes unless, of course, it was part of the con.

"I miss him," Chameleon said. "I wish I'd said certain things. Well, it doesn't matter."

Apollo was touched by the mixed concern and fondness in the man's voice.

"Sometimes you sound like his real father?"

"Yeah, don't I? I like the kid, that's all." After a moment of silence, he said, "You know, Apollo, I think we have a chance."

"Sure."

"As long as you're with us, anyway."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chandra and her two siblings had not participated in the welcoming parade for the shuttle. Busy with one of their curious forays into the forest around the city, they'd been outside the perimeter of alien control. They heard the commotion and ran to see what was happening, arriving in time to see their fellow citizens sprawled on the ground near the shuttle. Occurrences like this were not unusual for the three children, and they watched it with only mild curiosity. Their interest was not aroused until the prisoners started leaving the shuttle and they spotted Apollo and Sheba. They almost missed seeing Trinzot and Diova walk casually away after the ceremony, holding hands and talking, ignoring the new prisoners and the shuttle.

When the prisoners had been gathered into ranks and led away, Zossie finally spoke, "See that? One of 'em wore a uniform like the Starbuck's."

Chandra's response was filled with disappointment.

"Yes, but he *wasn't* the Starbuck. He had dark hair."

Brynt had hardly noticed Apollo.

"There was a woman in warrior uniform, too," he said, his voice awed. "She was beautiful."

Chandra scoffed.

"She wasn't beautiful. Her face was too long. She had a pointed chin."

"That doesn't matter," Brynt protested.

Disgusted, Chandra frowned at her brother.

"Boys!" she said. "You have no aesthetic sense."

"And you do?"

"You bet I do!"

Brynt flinched at the fierce emphasis of her proud reply. Zossie, feeling the impulse to defend her brother, said, "She *was* pretty, Chandra." Annoyed, Chandra scowled at Zossie, who took a scared step backward, staying, "Well, kind of, anyway. Not as pretty as Mommy."

"Nobody's as pretty as her," Brynt said.

Chandra threw up her arms petulantly and said, "You're both ridiculous."

"Mommy's not pretty?" Zossie asked.

"Mommy's an attractive woman, but she's not a real beauty. Not like my real mother."

Brynt and Zossie, shocked by Chandra's remark, gazed at her in amazement.

"Mommy's not our real mommy?" Zossie asked, her voice frightened.

Chandra was as confused as her siblings.

"I don't know why I said that, Zossie. I really don't. Suddenly I got this picture of this other woman, another woman. A beautiful woman, and I thought, mother. She had the kind of red hair that glows in bright sunlight and a dark complexion and . . . and . . . I don't know what. She wasn't real. I don't know why I thought of her as my mother. Mommy's my mother. Our mother."

Brynt and Zossie were not, however, soothed by her disclaimer. All of the children had had this experience before, a moment when they seemed to recall, in vague scenes, a past life somewhere else in which they belonged to different families in different cities on different planets.

"I've had enough of watching ships and prisoners," Chandra said suddenly. "Let's go do something else. Brynt?"

"Well, all right," Brynt agreed reluctantly.

Zossie laughed. "He wants to see more of the warrior woman, I can tell," she said.

"Zossie!" Brynt said threateningly.

"Oh, stop it, you two," Chandra said. "C'mon."

They turned around to leave the field. Unfortunately for them, Image Lords in a prison control room now located them and moved to punish them as trespassers. However, aliens tended to be kinder to children, and all they did was make these three run until their hearts pounded in their chests, their legs ached, and they felt as if they were going to die. For a moment Chandra passed out on her feet, but kept running. They ran all the way to their home, where the aliens released control. The children fell to the ground. Trinzot and Diova, strolling home from the field, merely stepped over them to go into the house. After a while, the children pulled themselves up and entered their home.

The prisoners were placed in a massive chamber inside the compound's largest building. There was nothing appealing to look at in the functional room. The prisoners didn't even perceive the holes behind which the recording cameras were placed.

Apollo, Sheba, Croft, and Chameleon found each other and tried to stay close together. The Borellian Nomen gathered in another section of the room and kept close track of their blood-hunt prey. Chameleon felt their vigilant scrutiny and had an impulse to hide behind the others.

Next to him, Apollo said, "Lovely accommodations. I've heard Cylon prison colonies look something like this."

"They look worse," Croft muttered. "I've seen one."

"Oh? When was that?"

Croft chuckled sardonically and rubbed his hands together nervously.

"When I was on the side of the good guys," he said. "We attacked a prison colony in a surprise maneuver. Blew it to

the skies. After rescuing the prisoners first."

"The breadth of your experiences continues to amaze me," Apollo said.

"I've been around," Croft said, shrugging.

In their control rooms, the Image Lords surveyed and examined the current crop of prisoners on monitors. There was the usual buzz of excitement among the aliens as they discussed their plans and strategies for the new arrivals. Whenever they had a fresh group of experimentees to work with, they liked to vary the tests and try out new devices. When a series of schemes had been decided upon, the aliens attacked their controls savagely.

Lucifer and Spectre, observing the prisoners' chamber on a series of screens intended solely for such viewing, saw many of the prisoners go pale and begin to squirm in their clothing. The aliens were projecting some kind of discomfort, Lucifer decided. Not all of them seemed affected.

Crutch, standing behind them, was busy combing out his facial hair with two of his hands. His concentration on grooming was quite intense, Lucifer noted.

"You see?" Crutch said. "The whole wall over there is impaneled transmitters, which can be synchronized to transmit one general order or used individually to concentrate on individuals or, more commonly, to transmit different aspects of the general scheme. Once individuals have proven themselves receptive, they are easier to control. At that point very complicated multiple suggestions may be made. Several of the new prisoners are obviously quite malleable. Amazing, eh?"

"Truly amazing, Lord Crutch, sir," Spectre said.

"Ever come across anything like this?" Crutch asked Lucifer.

"In a more primitive—much more primitive—form I created a device which could do something like it." Crutch leaned closer, clearly interested in what Lucifer was saying. "It transmitted emotion, in varying strengths, into humans."

"*You* created it?" asked Spectre, who had been present at the demonstration of Lucifer's emotion-device. "I thought it was Baltar's invention."

Baltar had lied to Spectre and the Imperious Leader about the device, claiming it as his own. At first Lucifer had been annoyed. However, after the Imperious Leader had been driven into a helpless rage because of a flaw in the machine, Lucifer had been grateful that the Leader believed the debacle was Baltar's fault. Now, if Spectre ever returned to the Leader with the truth, he could make a great deal of trouble for Lucifer.

"Did I say I created it?" Lucifer said. "An unusual slip. I will have to check certain of my speech circuits. Of course it was Baltar's invention. I merely assisted."

"And became possessive about it, it seems," Spectre said. "Imperious Leader has commented often, Lucifer, on your . . . independence."

Lucifer, recognizing the threat in Spectre's declaration, vowed to be more careful of what he said in his company.

Apollo gazed around the room, watching several of the prisoners caress each other affectionately. The romance was becoming more intense, progressing to kissing and firm embraces. He was not at first aware of the lusty way that Croft was eyeing Sheba. Sheba, on her part, had not noticed Croft's concentration on her. She was too troubled by the stirrings of her own feelings toward Apollo. She wanted the captain to take her in his arms and perform some of the acts he was watching with such disturbed interest.

"What's gotten into these people?" Apollo asked.

"Nature, Apollo," Croft said, without taking his gaze away from Sheba. "Nature's gotten into these people."

"It doesn't make any sense. We're prisoners here, for God's sake, this is no time for—"

"Any time's the right time. What say, Sheba?"

Sheba, who hadn't been listening to the conversation, reacted to her name. "Huh?"

"Do you agree?" Croft said, stepping closer to her.

"Agree what?"

"Any time is the right time."

"Time for what?"

"Look around you. For *that!* For romance, lovemaking, affection."

Sheba finally saw the desire in Croft's eyes and said, "Oh, shut up, Croft."

Croft was only half-conscious of Apollo's abrupt laugh. He knew mainly that he wanted the lovely woman in the tight-fitting flight uniform.

"I'm shocked," he said. "And I thought we were destined for each other."

"What?" Sheba said, puzzled.

"Stop it, Croft," Apollo said.

Croft turned and smiled viciously at Apollo.

"So the captain's a tad jealous, hey?"

"Croft, just because everybody else's acting like fools doesn't mean—"

"God, Apollo, you sound like your daddy. Every time he opens his mouth, out spills some kind of pious morality. You and he—"

Apollo, his fists clenched, moved angrily toward Croft. Croft merely stood his ground and grinned. Neither of them noticed Maga and Bora standing to the side, watching them with amusement. The Borellian Nomen were not affected by the romantic auras in the room. They had no customs of love. When they needed anything, they just took it.

Chameleon stepped in between Apollo and Croft. His face was pale. He made a half-hearted gesture to calm the anger of the two men, then his knees buckled.

"Apollo?" he said plaintively. Apollo, concerned for the old man, felt his anger leave him.

"What is it, Chameleon?"

"I don't know. I feel dizzy. I think . . . think I'm going to pass out. I'm—"

He fell. Even his fall had a kind of graceful movement to it. Apollo knelt by him.

In the control room, the aliens, ever intrigued by the unexpected reactions to their machinations, discussed Chameleon's fainting spell with avid enthusiasm.

"Is he all right?" Sheba asked.

"The old geezer's all right," Croft said and put his arm around her waist. "Sheba, you are the most seductive female I've seen in—in I don't know how long."

She wriggled out of his grasp without responding. For a moment Croft lost his urge to pursue her. This ugly, crude approach was uncharacteristic of him, anyway, but nevertheless he could feel a tugging in his head, urging him on.

"We should get Chameleon out of here," Apollo yelled. "How do you make contact with one of those—"

"Ah, forget it, Apollo," Croft said. "This is a prison. He'll be all right." He turned away from Apollo and stepped in front of Sheba. "Sheba, I can't keep my hands off you."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. She tried to resist, but he was too quick.

"Let me go, Croft," Sheba cried.

Apollo looked up, saw Sheba squirming in Croft's arms. He stood up, grabbed Croft's shoulders, and yanked him backward. The move disrupted Croft's balance, and his hold on Sheba weakened enough for her to spring free. Regaining his balance, he turned on Apollo, growled, and took a punch at him. Apollo's head darted sideways, and Croft's fist missed contact. Apollo jabbed Croft in the face and then made a solid blow to Croft's midsection. Croft doubled up momentarily, then kicked at Apollo, hitting him in the thigh, sending him reeling backward.

The Nomen, watching the fight, saw their opportunity. Maga strode to Chameleon, scooped up the unconscious man, and carried him away.

Sheba, intervening between the battlers, convinced them to stop fighting. Both of them glared at each other and tried to catch their breath. Sheba, unable to resist the alien manipulation, threw herself into Apollo's arms and embraced him.

Croft stared at them and growled bitterly, "So that's how it is, huh? The uptight lady and the holier-than-thou hotshot pilot—how appropriate. An uplifting romance."

The control room Image Lords chattered gleefully. This was the kind of unexpected acceleration of circumstances that they particularly delighted in. However, it was time to go on to another stage. Their many arms rapidly manipulated controls.

In the prisoners' room, embracing couples began to separate, confused about why they'd been embracing in the first place.

Sheba backed away from Apollo, saying, "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"You don't know?" Croft said. "Sure you don't. I don't know what came over me either, how about that?"

"Stop squabbling," Apollo said, "we—"

"Apollo!" Sheba shouted. "Chameleon, where is he?"

Apollo scrutinized the room frantically. He saw the massive back of a Borellian Noman disappearing into a crowd.

"The Nomen! It's them, I know it!"

He rushed toward the closing ranks of the crowd, Sheba and Croft just behind him. Pushing people aside, he saw Maga holding Chameleon in his arms, Bora next to him, other Nomen beginning to gather around their two leaders.

"Put him down!" Apollo yelled. "Now!"

"Careful, Captain," Maga said. "You have no weapons to enforce your puny authority here."

He nodded his head downward. Apollo then saw that the Nomen were still armed. Laser boles still clung to the crossed belts on their chests. Of course. The aliens hadn't realized that the bright jewellike ornaments on the Nomen bandoleers were really weapons.

"You won't use boles in here," Apollo said.

"Can you be sure of that?" Bora said.

"It is useless for you to interfere," Maga warned. "We are on blood trail, and it is no business of yours."

"Blood trail?" Apollo said. "You agreed to call that off. You told the commander—"

"Our vows aboard the *Galactica* do not hold here, Captain. We are free to resume our ways."

Croft whispered to Sheba, "Who are these guys? No, don't say it, I know it's a long story."

In Maga's arms, Chameleon squirmed and came awake.

"Where am I? Oh . . . oh, my."

"You are ours, Captain Dimitri," Bora said, "or Chameleon, or whatever name you use now."

Chameleon smiled weakly.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"Apollo," Croft said suddenly.

"What?"

Croft walked to Apollo and turned his back on Maga.

"I don't want to risk my life for this Chameleon," he said.

"Get out of the way, Croft."

"I was going to say—"

Croft suddenly lunged backward and elbowed Maga in the stomach. Before the Noman could even double up in pain, Croft had kicked him in the side and jabbed three quick punches in Maga's hirsute face. The blows served to dislodge Chameleon from Maga's grasp, at least enough for the slippery and graceful man to slide downward, then jump free as soon as his feet hit the floor. Apollo, reacting immediately to Croft's lead, sent Bora reeling backward with a pair of quick strong blows. Sheba hit another of the Nomen with a backhanded punch that knocked him off his feet.

"Move!" Apollo yelled, and the Galacticans retreated, taking care to get enough of the crowd between them and the volatile Nomen, who were yanking people aside in their attempt to pursue.

"They have weapons," Apollo said to Croft.

"Are they smart enough not to use them here?"

"I think so, but you never can tell with one of those—"

Suddenly all around them people began to scream and squirm in pain. Some of them fell to the floor. Apollo had to jump over a young woman in order not to trip over her. Soon more than half the men and women in the room were on the floor writhing in pain.

"Apollo!" Sheba called. He turned and saw that all the fallen people had given Maga a clear view of them. His left hand was reaching toward his laser bole belt. Before he touched the bole, his face contorted in agony, and his hand reached for his head instead. His scream roared and echoed through the room. Apollo thought he saw the walls shake from it. Maga, too, fell.

Then Sheba and Chameleon both howled in pain.

"What's going on?" Apollo said.

"I don't know," replied Croft, then he grabbed at his own head. "I—oh, God!"

Croft joined the writhing mob on the floor. Few people were now standing. Apollo watched more and more fall. Then, with the sharpness of several knife blades in his skull, he finally felt the pain that was tormenting everybody else in the room. It was excruciating, like his brains were being sliced up. His consciousness fading, he began to fall.

Lucifer watched Apollo's descent to the floor and was appalled by the expression on the young captain's face. He had seen enough of the Image Lords' manipulations.

"Why do you give them such pain?" Lucifer asked Crutch.

Two of Crutch's hairy arms gestured upward in what was evidently an Image Lord version of a shrug.

"Humanoids tend to remember pain," he said, "and fear it. The more pain we give them early on, the easier to control them later. All routine procedure for us, chum."

Lucifer did not care to look at the screens any longer.

"What will happen now?" he asked.

"Can't say," Crutch said laconically. "This looks to be a pretty good batch. You don't often get a fight breaking out like that. And a pretty one it was. We delight in variation."

"Some of your . . . manipulation seems quite cruel."

Crutch laughed that screechy laugh that Lucifer had heard too often now.

"We make no such judgments. It is fun, mate. That's all, just fun."

"But what of the pain you cause?"

"What of it? Sure, they endure some pain, but for the greater good. I'll show you the city. Euphoria, we call it. The citizens of Euphoria lead good lives because of us. They are granted a great deal of comfort and pleasure, are entertained by our various devices and contraptions, and even have a wide variety of literature, art, and show. We use them for our own purposes from time to time. The rest of their lives is contentment in a worry-free environment. Hang my strips out to dry, I believe we provide for them better lives than they ever knew before."

"It seems cruel to me," Lucifer said, and was sorry for the weakness of his comment.

Spectre glided to Crutch's side and oozed, "And ingenious. Oh, quite ingenious."

All the humans were now lying still. Lucifer wondered what their opinion of Crutch's benign philosophy might be.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was no indication that Starbuck's squadron had been detected flying down to The Joyful Land. The pilots settled their Vipers onto a field not far from Euphoria. As they emerged from their cockpits they could see the evening glow of the city beginning to grow as twilight came on. Beyond the city, the system's sun was setting behind mountains whose arrangement was nearly symmetrical. Starbuck was joined by Boomer, Bojay, and Hera next to his Viper.

"Kind of a pretty place," Bojay commented.

"Maybe," Boomer said. "Gives me the chills though. And not from this cool breeze."

Starbuck wondered what Boomer was feeling. There was a breeze, true, but it seemed quite warm to him.

"My calculations show the shuttle landed south of here," Hera said. "Not too far. We can walk it."

"We?" Starbuck said. "Cadet, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but only Boomer and I are going exploring right now. S.O.P."

"I want to go, too," Bojay said. "Sheba's—"

"No," Starbuck said, "I want you and the others to stay by the Vipers. Be ready to take off if threatened. Don't wait for Boomer and me to return."

Bojay, who never liked sitting around and waiting, pouted, "All right," he said sullenly.

Starbuck regretted not taking Bojay with him. Bojay and Sheba had been wingmates for a long while. But Starbuck and Boomer had been paired for longer, and knew each other's moves so well that it made sense for them to stay together in a dangerous situation like this. He explained to

his squadron that he and Boomer would head out in the direction Hera indicated in order to scout out the terrain and see if they could locate where Apollo and the others had been taken. Then they'd return in order to block out a strategy of rescue. The pilots went to their posts, and Boomer and Starbuck started their journey.

After they'd walked some distance without talking, Starbuck finally said, "Pleasant smells in the air. Good, after the oily odors inside a Viper."

"You say so. I'd feel a little less nervous inside a cockpit."

"Boomer, you have refined caution into an exact science, you know that?"

"We're still here, aren't we?"

"Point taken."

If they hadn't had a mission to attend to, the trip through the forest would have been a fine stroll. Not only was the air filled with the perfumes of many flowers and trees, but the gentle and autumnal colors of the landscape were soothing to the eye. Tiny furry animals frequently skittered by them, apparently unafraid of their presence, and some multicolored birds watched them stoically from branches.

Before they came to a clearing, they were aware of a soft light coming from its direction. As they emerged from the woods, they saw that the light was a glow located beyond some rolling hills.

"Seems to be a city over that way, judging by the light," Starbuck said.

"Makes sense," Boomer agreed. "Probably the city we saw when we were descending."

"Let's take a look. It might be where they took Apollo and Sheba."

"Right."

They walked on with a special determination.

In an anteroom off an Image Lord control area, Crutch showed Lucifer and Spectre scenes of life in the city, where the citizens appeared to live pleasantly normal lives in a well-planned urban environment. Houses were spread along streets with an admirable geometric neatness, and commercial areas were decorated in pastel eye-soothing colors. The people went about their business cheerfully, frequently waving at or speaking to each other. They smiled often, and seemed quite at ease with themselves and each other.

"So you see," Crutch commented, "we treat our subjects well, allowing them a pleasant domestic life with all the conveniences and luxuries that go along with such an existence."

Lucifer pointed to a screen in the middle of the complex arrangement of screens.

"What's happening there?" he asked.

Crutch leaned down to take a good look.

"Ah," he said, when he recognized the scene, "the family is gathering together for an entertainment. See there, mates, in the middle of the room?"

He turned and ordered, in his own language, a technician to enlarge the picture. When it had refocused, Lucifer could see in the center of the screen a smiling, gun-toting figure shooting at an offscreen enemy. Lucifer, astonished, recognized the figure.

"Starbuck!" he said.

The name drew Spectre's attention to the screen. He had only seen Starbuck briefly, long ago, so he asked Lucifer, "Lieutenant Starbuck? From the *Galactica*? Is he here, in The Joyful Land?"

"Don't understand ya, chums," Crutch said.

"That man in the middle of the room," Lucifer said. "I know him. I have met him."

"Him?"

Crutch, with an ugly crescendo, began his awesomely ugly laugh.

"Starbuck, is he a prisoner here?" Lucifer asked. He found himself hoping against hope that Starbuck was here. He so wanted to see the reckless young lieutenant again.

"That gunslinger there ain't a real person, mates," Crutch said. "It's an illusion created by that little box there at the kid's feet. See?"

"Yes. You mean it's a projection from that box?"

"Sort of. It creates a field in which settings are possible at all sizes and shapes. The people can manipulate the scene themselves. In a very primitive way, of course. Nothing like we do here. The figures, too, like your buddy there. There is a story that we create for them, but to a certain extent the figures and what they do are manipulable, too. A clever toy, don't you think, swabbie?"

"What's a swabbie?" Spectre asked.

"Beats me. Our slang goes back so many generations, nobody understands it anymore."

Lucifer tapped the surface of the screen with his long thin metal fingers.

"Then that's just a *depiction* of Starbuck?" he asked.

"Right."

"But where did they get the image in the first place?"

"I don't get you."

"I mean, how did they know there was a Starbuck to recreate for this dramatic process?"

"Imagescan's what we call it. I don't know about this particular Starcrossed, but—"

"Starbuck."

"Whatever. Our stories are often derived from the mythology of the beings we capture, so I suppose the exploits of your real Starbuck were renowned on one of the cultures we invaded to obtain subjects, and we were able to reconstruct heroic stories about him. It's simple to recreate a person through Imagescan. A few memories, some descriptive details, and, easy as sky-pie, you've got the image of Starbuck. If we discover you guys are heroes where you come from, we can concoct little entertainments about you."

"We're hardly heroes," Lucifer said.

"Still, you might make good story material. I'll talk to the Image Planners. They're in charge of these little amusements, and I hear they're always looking for new material for stories. Might be really good. The Two Metalmops saving their world from evil invaders. And no need for reconstruction, they'd have you right here to copy. I could clear a good piece of change with—"

"Please," Lucifer interrupted, "I don't wish that."

"Why not, Lucifer?" Spectre asked. "It sounds interesting."

"It sounds embarrassing."

"Don't be silly. We can't be embarrassed."

Maybe you can't, Lucifer thought.

"It seems to me you've lost some of your adventuresome spirit, Lucifer."

Crutch went off to contact the Image Planners. Spectre turned to Lucifer and began grilling him about Starbuck. To get rid of him, Lucifer told him what he knew about Starbuck. Spectre showed special interest in the fact that the human was a card sharp, and that he had taught Lucifer a few of the games, then beaten him every time. He asked what steps Lucifer had taken since to improve his strategy

and gamesmanship. Lucifer couldn't imagine why Spectre was so curious.

Spectre, on his part, had a sense he could use the information, although he had no idea how. But he was sure he could find a way.

It was, of course, Chandra who had led the children into the woods. Bored with the fifth run-through of the new adventure of the Starbuck, jealous of the woman companion Denra who got so much of his attention between battles, and with no new episodes of the Starbuck forthcoming for at least a week, she had needed something different to do. As usual, the other children were enticed by her whims.

Just after twilight, they found themselves in an unfamiliar part of the woods. They had been playing adventure games based on the Starbuck, with Brynt enacting the hero. Chandra found the games joyless since her brother hadn't even the slightest resemblance to the Starbuck. Exhausted, they all plopped down under a tree.

"We should be getting home now," Brynt said.

"Mister prim and proper," Chandra said softly. "Always want to follow the rules, don't you?"

Even though he recognized the threat in her subdued voice, Brynt was too tired to be careful with her.

"That's why there are rules, dumbie," he said. "You—"

"Don't fight please," interrupted Zossie. "I'm so sick of the two of you always fighting when we get alone."

Chandra turned on her little sister, and Zossie recoiled before the disastrous gentleness in her voice.

"Zossie, if they bottled wine with an 'h,' you'd be rich from selling your whines."

Zossie, braver than usual, stuck out her tongue, then skittered away.

"You're not as smart as you think you are, Chandra," she said.

"I'm smarter," Chandra said, her voice staying at a dangerously steady level. "Anyway, we're free out here, can't you feel it?"

"We're always free," Brynt said. "This is a free society."

Chandra's look at him could have wilted flowers.

"Oh, yeah?" she said. "If they shone a hundred bright lights on you, you'd still be in the dark, Brynt. Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"There's no pull here. Nothing tugging inside our heads. It's a genuine free zone, away from whatever it is that controls us."

"What in blazes are you talking about?" Zossie asked. "Controls?"

Chandra began picking pieces of bark off the tree. The bark was brittle and broke into long thin shards when she closed her fist.

"I can't believe you two don't feel it," she said. "Aren't you aware that we occasionally lose time? Don't you have suspicions that sometimes we act bizarrely, our minds and bodies being manipulated by someone else? Don't you wonder about those ugly nightmarish creatures who don't seem connected with us, except to herd new people into the prison compound?"

"Chandra, I don't—"

"Yes, Chandra," Brynt said eagerly. "Yes, I do. I know what you mean. Just like you say, little tugs inside your head."

Chandra's body relaxed. She had thought she might, after all, be the only one to sense the control. The only one *insane* enough to feel it.

"And you, Zossie?" she asked.

"You're playing a game on me, aren't you, you two? This is a game. It's gotta be!"

"You feel it, too, don't you?"

Zossie stared at the ground. She pushed up dirt with her heel.

"I don't know," she mumbled. "Maybe. It is just us, just the three of us?"

"No," Chandra answered. "I think it's everybody."

"Even Mommy and Daddy?"

"Even them. I'm not even sure they're our mommy and daddy."

"Chandra!" Zossie thought Chandra's words blasphemous.

"I'm not sure you're my sister," Chandra went on. "Not sure Brynt's our brother. I'm not sure of anything. I just have this sense, vague memories almost, that my life didn't start here in The Joyful Land."

"That's silly," Brynt said. "Where did it start then?"

"I don't know. Someplace else. Mommy and Daddy come from somewhere else. I've heard them talk about it. Why not us, too?"

"Because we were born here."

For a quiet boy, Brynt could be relatively stubborn.

"But I don't know if we were," Chandra said, not so sure now that she was on secure ground. "I don't think—what was that?"

The sound of footsteps came from the path to their right. Gesturing to Brynt and Zossie to be quiet, Chandra sneaked forward in a crouch to the fringe of the path. Parting some

high grass, she saw two figures approaching. She scurried to shelter behind trees, while Zossie and Brynt found hiding places next to her.

Starbuck and Boomer walked rapidly but carefully along the path. They were following the city's glow, which they perceived beyond the trees.

"All that light, looks like a pretty big place, Boomer."

"I know. Should we get this near to it?"

"Take it easy. That's where Apollo probably is. In that city, or damn near it."

"Near as I can tell, we're close to where we tracked that ship."

"There you go. Way the light's coming through, there must be an open field ahead."

They passed the area where the children hid. In the shadows, Chandra's jaw dropped open in surprise. Zossie found it extremely difficult to keep quiet until the two men had gone on.

When it was safe to speak, she said excitedly, "It's the Starbuck! It's the Starbuck!"

"Hush, Zossie," Chandra cautioned. "They might hear you."

"What difference does that make. I want to meet him, want to touch him."

"I know. Me, too. But let's see what he's up to. Maybe there's an adventure."

The chance of watching the Starbuck actually having one of his adventures thrilled the children. Eagerly, they slipped out to the path and proceeded in the direction the Starbuck and his companion had gone.

After a few steps, Brynt muttered, "Funny."

"Funny?" Chandra asked.

"Yeah. I didn't think the Starbuck was real. I thought he was an invention of the Imagescan people. I thought it was all made up."

"Let you operate the control box and you think you know everything. There's the Starbuck up ahead. Right there. Doubt your eyes, then."

The children slowed down so that the two strolling warriors wouldn't look back and detect their presence.

"Oh, I don't doubt my eyes," Brynt whispered. "Maybe he's an actor or something. You know, somebody hired to be the Starbuck for the Imagescanners. Maybe they hire people for the parts, maybe—"

"Oh, stop!" Chandra said irritably. "Criminy, Brynt, you have no imagination. It doesn't even matter if the Starbuck is real or not, especially when we see him out here without the Imagescan controls. This is a miracle!"

"Oh, yes, Chandra," Zossie said dreamily.

They were now so close to Starbuck and Boomer that they had to take cover behind trees. It was lucky they slipped in the shadows when they did, for the Starbuck soon looked back.

"What's the matter, bucko?" Boomer asked.

"Nothing. I just have this uncomfortable feeling we're being followed, that's all."

Boomer turned around and peered down the path. The children tried to duck down even more. He probably wouldn't have seen them if they had been visible; his gaze was set too high. The two warriors agreed that Starbuck's uneasiness came from his imagination and resumed their walk. The children crept after them, using the trees as cover all the way to the open field.

It was the same field where the children had crouched earlier in the day, watching the arrival of prisoners. In the

distance, the prison compound could be seen but closer, to the left, was the border of Euphoria.

"Well, what say, Boomer?"

"Not sure. Not across the field. We'd be too vulnerable there."

Starbuck nodded. Crossing his arms, he said, "I think we have to check out the city. The people I can see from here, look at them, they seem perfectly normal. I don't even think we'll be overdressed."

"What about our guns?"

Starbuck peered down at his holster, realizing that their armed condition might be perceived as an unwelcome gesture.

"Well," he said, "I don't want to go in there unarmed. Okay, let's ditch the holsters here, keep the guns inside our shirts."

"I'll buy that."

They set the holsters gingerly against a tree, and threw some leaves over them. Hiding the guns inside their shirts, they rearranged their clothing and headed for the city. The children left their hiding places and rushed toward the tree. Brushing away leaves, Chandra picked up Starbuck's holster, and Brynt snatched Boomer's.

"The Starbuck seems kinda careful," Brynt observed while his fingers stroked the slightly furry surface of the holster. "Not like when we see him on Imagescan."

"He's on some sort of tricky mission," Chandra said, holding Starbuck's holster against her cheek, and rubbing it gently against her skin. "Any fool can see that. Even you can see that. Oh, my goodness, I *love* this holster. It's really the Starbuck's holster, think of it!"

She held out the holster then pressed it against her chest. Brynt thought the silly look on her face was swoony. It

disgusted him. Anyhow, she had the *good* holster, the Starbuck's holster.

"Big deal," Zossie said. "I don't have a holster."

"Here," Brynt said, "you can have mine."

Zossie scoffed at the offer. "That's not the Starbuck's," she said. Brynt, so conscious of that, regretted his kind offer. What right had Zossie to say that? It was his right to say it.

"They're getting ahead of us," Chandra said. "We got to catch up. Maybe we can get more stuff from them."

The Starbuck and his sidekick had nearly reached the border of Euphoria. The children had to hotfoot it to close the distance between them.

Boomer and Starbuck came onto a sidewalk leading into the city. There were no people in the immediate vicinity. Walking along, they felt a cool evening breeze against their skin. There were pleasant trees all along the street, and nice pleasant-looking homes set neatly back from it.

"You can't tell me the smells here don't get to you," Starbuck said. "It's like back home on Caprica to me. The hometown where my parents—my step-parents—lived. I used to play on streets like this, climb trees like that one . . ."

"Mess around with little girls in houses like those."

Starbuck stopped abruptly and grabbed Boomer's arm. His grip was strong, hurtful. He spoke angrily, "It might surprise you to know, Boomer old fig, that I was a shy kid and never had much to do with girls. I was a late bloomer."

"Yeah, but look how you bloomed."

Starbuck released his hold and started walking on.

"I wish you guys'd stop razzing me about—"

He bit off his words because he saw people walking toward them, a family out for a pleasant evening walk in their neighborhood. There was a father, mother, and a little boy,

all of them average-looking. The boy wore clean crisp clothes.

"Act casual," Starbuck muttered to Boomer.

"How do we know what casual's like in this place?"

Starbuck grinned at the oncoming smiles on all three faces. The child's smile, however, quickly disappeared as he scrutinized Starbuck. His eyes grew wide in awe. He yelped, and his mother told him to be quiet.

"But, mama," the child said. "Look at him. Look at him."

"I see," the mother said. "And a very nice-looking man he is." Starbuck's smile grew larger and Boomer had to suppress a groan. "I'm sorry, sir. Crenbolt's a little excitable for his age. Say hello to the men, Crenbolt."

The child's eyes saddened and his greeting was sullen.

"Hello."

"Evening," the father of the family said cheerfully.

Starbuck and Boomer replied together: "Evening." They sauntered on, past the family.

Behind them, the mother remarked to the child, "They must be soldiers of some kind, son. Looks like uniforms they have on. Never saw any quite like that, though."

Starbuck glanced back to see the mother peeking back at him. Embarrassed, she turned back, her body straightening as she walked away. The child seemed to be trying, futilely, to tell his mother something.

"Strange kid," Boomer said. "Impressed by you, though."

"Crenbolt! Imagine a name like that? No wonder some kids are strange. A monicker like that'd make anybody strange. Crenbolt! Hey, what's that?"

Starbuck pointed off to his left, his body tensed, his hand rubbing his tunic where his gun was hidden.

"What?" Boomer said. "I don't see anything."

"I thought I saw movement over that way. I told you, I got this sense somebody's following us."

"Shall we wait here and see?"

Starbuck considered Boomer's suggestion for a moment before saying, "Nah, let's go on. Probably my imagination, anyway."

They resumed their walk, keeping a fast pace. When they had turned a corner, the children left their hiding places and met on the sidewalk.

"That was a close one," Brynt said. "He saw us, I think."

"So what?" Chandra said, shrugging. She was pressing Starbuck's holster to her chest with both hands. "He's the Starbuck. He won't be afraid of us. C'mon, we got to hurry or they'll get away altogether."

"I'm getting tired," Zossie whined. "My feet hurt."

"Well," Chandra said coldly, "you just stay right here, then."

"You're supposed to take care of me."

"Take care of yourself, small fry. I'm not missing this chance, not for nobody."

Chandra broke into a run, and Brynt was quickly after her. Zossie, with a child's mild curse, followed them reluctantly. Turning the corner, they saw Starbuck and Boomer up ahead, stopped across the street from a shopping area.

Standing in the darkness, Starbuck surveyed the brightly lit and well-populated area. It was clear that the round bubblelike buildings were stores, busy with people engaged in normal consumer activity.

"What say, Boomer? Shall we mingle?"

"I'd rather stay here and observe, thank you."

"Come on, we've got to know the people, maybe we can find out where they've put Apollo. Otherwise we just wander

around this place as tourists. Have to take a chance, Boomer."

Their first few steps onto the strangely soft surface of the shopping area's promenade were quite tentative. They were ready to act quickly if anyone challenged them but instead, nobody particularly noticed them and they blended in easily with the busy shoppers. In fact, as Crutch had shown Lucifer not long before, many of the buying choices of the shoppers were being guided gently by Image Lords who found shopping one of the more amusing human activities. To beings who merely took what they wanted, any kind of bargaining seemed a laughable event. On their part, the shoppers did not realize that the little tugs in their mind urging them to buy were not their own impulsive feelings.

Chandra, Brynt, and Zossie followed Starbuck and Boomer into the shopping area, able to stay close to them now as part of the crowd. A couple of times Chandra walked just behind Starbuck's left elbow. She noticed a couple of grease stains on his sleeve, and she memorized their shapes.

"You think the Staibuck's doing something, Chandra?" Brynt asked. "I mean, investigating something, looking for some bad guy to blast away?"

" 'Course he is. He's the Starbuck, isn't he?"

While some people appeared to take a second look at their uniforms, Starbuck and Boomer mixed in with the crowd easily.

"Nice place, Boomer. If I didn't have other plans for my life, I could easily settle down in a town like this."

"I can't imagine you *settling* anywhere. Heck, you can't even sit still in a chair for long, bucko."

"Nah. I'm made for the easy life."

As if to display his newfound commitment to a restful existence, Starbuck slipped a cigar out of his tunic pocket.

He rolled it around in his fingers for a moment, listening with pleasure to its crinkling sounds.

"Thought you were giving up those fumerellos," Boomer commented.

"I give 'em up. For periods of time. Now's not one of those periods."

He finally unwrapped the cigar, tossing the wrapper cavalierly over his shoulder. As soon as he had gone on a few steps, Chandra pounced on the wrapper, picking it up and rubbing her fingers over it.

"It's the Starbuck's," she said dreamily.

"It's only cigar wrappings, Chandra," Brynt said. He was a little jealous he hadn't thought of retrieving it.

"I don't care," Chandra said. "I'm keeping it forever."

Again they closed the gap between themselves and the two colonial warriors, walking only a few steps behind them.

"We're not getting very far in finding out where Apollo is," Boomer remarked.

"Patience, Boomer, patience. We'll ask someone. First, we've got to pick a friendly face. Ah, there's one."

Boomer, amused, noted that the friendly face his buddy had selected was also a pretty one, about the prettiest woman in the immediate vicinity. She had soft blond hair, a couple of shades darker than Starbuck's, and bright blue eyes. *That's Starbuck all right*, he thought. Starbuck touched the young woman's arm. She smiled warmly as soon as she saw his handsome eager face.

"Excuse me, miss, I wonder if you—"

"I know you from somewhere," she said. Boomer, noticing her voice was sexy, thought: *God, we're in trouble now.*

"I don't believe we've met," Starbuck said, with some charm, "but—"

"But we have. I'm sure of it."

"If we had, I'd surely remember. But you see, I've never been—"

"I know who you are. I know. I can't believe it. It's you. It's really you, isn't it?"

Starbuck, confused, wondered if he'd managed to stop the only crazy lady in the area.

"Well, uh, yeah," he said. "Yeah, it's me. I mean, it *is* me. I've always been me. I've—"

"I know your name. Can't think of it. Let me see." Her arm darting out suddenly, she stopped a passing middle-aged man. "It's him," she said to the man. "Can't you see it's him?"

"You do look familiar, son. Can't place you, though."

Boomer was looking for an exit.

"Maybe we better get out of here," he whispered to Starbuck.

"Why, Boomer? Look at all the attention I'm getting us."

"That's what's bothering me."

The middle-aged man spoke over his shoulder to an elderly woman in a veiled hat, who had stopped to gawk.

"It's him," the man said. "Isn't it?"

"I do believe it is," the woman said.

"But what's his name? Where do we know him from?"

"I'm not sure."

Each of the trio called to other shoppers, asking Starbuck's identity of each of them. Chandra, Brynt, and Zossie, sensing danger, lingered in the background.

A little girl slipped through the legs of someone in the crowd. When she saw Starbuck, her jaw dropped open. She

couldn't speak at first, then she yelled at the top of her voice: *"It's the Starbuck! It really is! It's the Starbuck!"*

Murmurs of agreement and recognition buzzed through the crowd. Starbuck removed the cigar from his mouth, and spread his arms in a friendly gesture. Bewildered and pleased simultaneously, he said, "Well, Starbuck's my name, but how did you folk—"

"I love you!" said the woman he'd originally stopped.

"Well, I'm flattered, miss, but—"

The middle-aged man pushed forward and put his hands on Starbuck's shirt, crunched up a small section of material.

"Let me have something," he said. "A piece off your jacket, maybe, or—"

Starbuck pushed the man away. The little girl sprang to her feet and announced, "I want his gun!"

"Hey, wait," Starbuck said to both of them, "I can't give you anything. I—"

"Just one kiss, a big kiss," the pretty woman said. "I've seen every one of your adventures."

Starbuck and Boomer exchanged puzzled glances, both of them backing away a step from the crowd.

"What?" Starbuck said to his new admirers. "I don't get it. You people can't know me."

A chubby man in the second rank of the crowd punched the shoulder of a buddy and yelled, "See? How humble he is? I knew he'd be humble in person."

"I didn't even know you could see him in person," said a wide-eyed matron.

"A button from your clothing," the middle-aged man begged. "C'mon."

"Yeah," said the chubby man. "Me, too."

The crowd surged forward. Starbuck backed off, the cigar dropping from his fingers. He didn't notice Chandra sweeping in to snatch it from the ground. After slipping the cigar into the holster, she and Zossie grabbed Starbuck's arm, while Brynt did the same for Boomer.

"Come with us," Chandra said quietly.

"Why should—" Starbuck said.

"We know the way out." She gave his arm an affectionate squeeze, then addressed the crowd, "The Starbuck can't do anything for you folks right now. But he'll be at the Friendship Emporium later this evening, signing Imagescan packets."

The children began to lead Starbuck and Boomer away. They had put some space between them and the crowd, when a man toward the rear of the group shouted, "Hey, that's just a kid. She's not important. Why should we listen to her?"

"C'mon," said someone else, "let's get the Starbuck!"

The woman Starbuck had originally stopped to get information from screamed in a bone-chilling voice: *"Yeah. He's ours! Let's get him!"*

The crowd started moving forward like a wall of Cylon raiders, with the same kind of murderous instincts. At the children's promptings, Starbuck and Boomer started to run. Chandra pointed to an alley between two of the stores, and the five of them ran into it. Zossie tripped and fell, and Boomer, seeing her fall, scampered back to pick her up and carry her through the alley.

People from the crowd bunched up within the alley and slowed their own progress. Only a few broke through to pursue the Starbuck and his entourage down a brightly lit suburban street. They screamed to attract the attention of the few pedestrians on the sidewalks.

If they hadn't had the children with them, Starbuck and Boomer would certainly have been caught by the mob. But Chandra and Brynt, enterprising children who had roamed all the neighborhoods, knew where to turn sharply to find side-streets nobody else would have expected and had a sense of what lawns they could traverse without encountering obstacles.

It wasn't long before the sound of pursuit had faded, but—at the children's insistence—they kept running. Finally Chandra led them down a path next to a house, and into a neatly landscaped back yard. At her signal, they all fell exhausted next to a colorful flower-crowded garden.

When he had caught his breath, Starbuck said in a cramped voice, "I don't know who you kids are, but thanks. Those monsters out there might've . . . I don't know what they'd do."

"Always pleased to help the Starbuck," Chandra announced proudly.

His name again. Why did everybody on this backwater planet seem to know who he was?

"How do you know me? And why do you call me *the* Starbuck?"

"That's who you are, silly," Zossie said, giggling. "*The* Starbuck!"

"This is weird," Boomer muttered. "Really weird."

"Why am I the Starbuck?"

"You don't know?" Brynt asked, bothered by Starbuck's ignorance about himself.

"I don't know what all this felgercarb is all about."

Chandra, tapping her fingers on the ground nervously, studied Starbuck's face. She noticed that he seemed more harried, more uncertain than the Starbuck had ever been.

The handsomeness of his face wasn't as neatly structured, either.

"Maybe you're under control like the rest of us," she said.

"Under control?" Boomer asked.

"Ah, that's just a ridiculous idea of Chandra's," Brynt said cruelly. "She thinks somebody's in our minds controlling us, running us."

"It's true!" Chandra protested.

"Will somebody explain something quick?" Starbuck asked.

Chandra stood up, smoothed out the wrinkles of her multilayered skirt.

"We'll show you," she said. "Come in the house."

"We go in?" Starbuck asked. "Just like that? We enter somebody's house?"

"It's our home," Chandra said. "We live here."

Starbuck and Boomer looked at each other, both wondering if they should now make their escape from this odd trio of children.

Chandra, going to the back door of the house, called out, "Mommy! Daddy! Look what we brought home!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Apollo woke up with tiny pains behind his eyes, like miniature laser beams slowly breaking up his eyeballs from behind. Glancing up, he saw Croft standing beside his bunk, smiling sardonically down at him.

"Good fight," Croft remarked. "Who won?"

"I passed out. Where's Chameleon?"

"Couldn't possibly tell you. I just woke up, too. He's probably in some other cell like this. If he's lucky, they didn't give him a Borellian Noman for a roommate."

Apollo stood up, went to the cell door, tested the strength of its thick iron bars. He couldn't budge them.

"We've got to get to Chameleon," he said, "and Sheba."

Croft sat on the bunk, put his feet up, and shrugged.

"Your move. I tested the door, too. Lock structure like nothing I ever seen before. I got no clue how to break it."

Apollo looked downcast.

"Chameleon could be killed."

"Probably. Us, too. After what we did, I think we might have moved up a few notches on the Nomen's blood trail list."

Croft was touched by Apollo's gloom.

"Don't worry, kid," he said. "The more problems you got, the meaner you get. That'll get us out of this. Eventually."

"Eventually?"

"You need a different attitude toward time when you're a convict, Apollo. We got plenty of time for me to teach it to you."

"There is much time," Bora said. Maga stood at the door, staring out, his eyes wrathful. "There is no time limit for a blood hunt."

"I know that, Bora. I should have killed him before. I should have killed all of them."

"We will, Maga, we will."

Chameleon, asleep on the bunk of his cell, squirmed from bad dreams. Several times he shouted out Starbuck's name. In his dreams, he seemed to just miss out meeting with Starbuck, sometimes watching his son be killed, or fall into bottomless depths.

In another cell, across the way, Sheba heard Chameleon's cries and her eyes saddened as she felt the futility of their present situation. Each step they took seemed to be taking them farther away from the *Galactica*. They might be stranded in The Joyful Land forever. Chameleon shouted Starbuck's name again. Sheba rushed to her cell door, trying to reach out to him.

Crutch had finally left Lucifer alone for a while. He now stood in the alien control room, staring at rows of display screens. On some of them, he saw prisoners in their cells, including those dressed in the outfits of the *Galactica*.

He wondered what he could possibly become in The Joyful Land. The Image Lords had made some tests on him, tried to see if they could control him the way they did other beings. The tests appeared to have been unsuccessful. Or were they? Were he and Spectre under the aliens' control, after all? So long as he felt he was acting of his own free will, he would not know if he was being manipulated or not. Perhaps he had been better off on Baltar's base-star. Being Baltar's underling again was infinitely preferable to remaining in this

off-the-trade-routes world. The Image Lords had no real use for him, and he had no wish to become an orchestra conductor of the Image Lord style of fantasy. He would rather find some lake somewhere, walk to its deepest spot, shut himself off, and rust.

We are in a real mess, he thought. But perhaps not we. Spectre, after all, appeared to be enjoying himself on The Joyful Land.

Starbuck usually liked being the center of attention, but not here, not in this plain living room, not with this average-looking family, all of whom smiled at him so admiringly.

Brynt had brought out the Imagescan. He set up the treated cloth sheet which, when spread flat on the floor, would be the field on which the images, translated from emissions emanating from the Imagescan control box, would appear in such stark detail. Brynt himself sat at the box, ready to operate it once Chandra's explanation of the Imagescan to Starbuck and Boomer was completed.

"Imagescan, therefore, is a fantasy field in which great adventures take place," she concluded. Then she turned to Brynt, gestured with a delicate hand-flourish, and said, "Turn it on, Brynt."

With a similiar flourish Brynt worked several controls on the box. Immediately an adventure field materialized on the sheet. Buildings appeared to spring out of the floor. Little people materialized out of nowhere and started walking the miniature city's streets. Aircrafts were formed out of dust motes in the air and flew over the buildings.

Starbuck was impressed.

"Will you look at that, Boomer?"

"Cute."

"Maybe we can take a couple sets back to the *Galactica*. For Boxey and the other kids."

"Don't get overenthusiastic, buddy."

Starbuck rolled his eyes, and said scornfully, "You must make a great tourist. You've always got reservations."

Brynt was dealing energetically with the controls. The size of the aircraft in the living room skies enlarged. Starbuck and Boomer could almost see the faces of the pilots in the cockpits.

A battle began suddenly. Enemy planes appeared out of nowhere and swooped down on the peaceful aircraft, shooting away.

"Wow!" Starbuck exclaimed. "What effects! And look at those things. They're like Vipers, Boomer. Almost. Not quite the same, but—"

One of the Viperlike planes exploded so graphically, its pieces flying outward, that both Starbuck and Boomer flinched and stepped backward. The children, watching their hero closely, were amused by his surprised reactions.

After several impressive explosions and some skillful piloting, the battle was over and the ambushers had been soundly defeated. The surviving planes landed on a field just outside the miniature city. Brynt manipulated the scene so that the city disappeared and only the airfield was at the center of the living room floor. Gradually one particular mini-Viper, gliding to a stop, took up most of the space.

Starbuck's jaw dropped nearly to the floor as he watched a quarter-sized version of himself emerge from the cockpit jauntily, step on the wing, and jounce down to the ground.

"Starbuck," Boomer cried, astonished. "It's you!" He looked closer at the small figure. "Well, almost."

"I know," muttered Starbuck, too flabbergasted to say more.

A tall beautiful woman with long flowing blond hair seemed to form out of the mist at the edge of the adventure-field. She ran to the Starbuck, threw her arms around him, and kissed him with so much passion that the miniature Starbuck's head was jerked back roughly.

"Oh, God," Boomer said, "it *is* you."

"Boomer!" Starbuck said threateningly.

"The truth hurts?" Boomer said, grinning.

"There are children present," Starbuck mumbled. Boomer laughed. Chandra concentrated her attention onto Starbuck, since she knew that the Starbuck on the floor was about to speak.

"Darling," the figure said, after smoothly disengaging himself from the woman, "how nice to see you again."

It was a voice quite like Starbuck's, but it was deeper and more booming. It also seemed a bit more sophisticated and confident. Boomer now laughed hysterically.

"I don't sound like that," Starbuck asked Boomer. "Do I?"

"Yes," the Starbuck said, "that was a tough one up there. A real fracas. But they're all tough."

"You were magnificent," the woman-figure said. "I saw you shoot down at least twenty of their planes."

"All in a day's work, I guess," the Starbuck said casually.

Starbuck groaned.

"Hey," he said, "that's not me. I mean, really, Boomer."

Boomer, still laughing, coughed out his words, "No. Not in a way, I guess."

"What do you mean, not in a way?"

"Every time I go up there," the Starbuck said, his voice sounding eerie, too loud for the quarter-sized figure, "not knowing if I'll come back, I know I *must* do my best. Too many people depend on me, after all."

"We love you," the woman said, kissing him again. "At least, / do, my darling."

"And I take heart, knowing that."

Boomer whooped scornfully.

"He hasn't got your style, Starbuck," he said, "but it's your message."

Chandra touched Brynt's shoulder, saying, "Cut the sound off, Brynt."

The quarter-sized Starbuck's voice spoke with a teary-eyed romanticism as Brynt lowered the sound.

"There are few moments as thrilling as when my sights center on a—"

After the sound was off, the figures' lips continued to move, and the woman kissed the Starbuck several more times. Whatever the Starbuck said, it seemed to impress the woman.

For a moment, none of the real people in the room said anything. Diova and Trinzot appeared to be unsettled. The children focused their attention on Starbuck, waiting for him to say something.

Finally, unable to contain herself any longer, Chandra spoke, "That . . ." She pointed to the Starbuck, who now had his arm around the woman-figure's shoulders. ". . . is you, am I correct?"

Starbuck's hands clenched and unclenched helplessly. He couldn't speak for a moment. When he did, it was in a weak, confused voice.

"Well, sort of. I mean . . . I mean, it looks something like . . . like me, but the sound . . ."

"I thought that was acting."

Starbuck stared at his near-duplicate. The figure's eyebrows were dramatically raised, and his hands gestured

theatrically.

"That may be acting to you," Starbuck said, "but it's pure ham to me. I'd never act like that, even if I were acting."

"I don't understand," Chandra said.

"What I'm saying is, there are certain resemblances, but I have nothing to do with what that figure does in your . . . in your illusions or whatever you call them."

"Imagescans," Brynt said.

"Imagescans," Starbuck said. "See, kids, that isn't me. What he's doing isn't anything I've ever done, what—"

"At least not with that particular woman," Boomer said, as he watched the Starbuck romance the female figure, who was clearly responding warmly.

"Don't confuse the issue, Boomer," Starbuck said. "Like he says, I do have a sort of, well, reputation for my . . . experiences with the opposite sex, but my style's a bit, well, different."

"He's never that smooth," commented Boomer.

"What do you mean, smooth? Call that smooth? That was as phony as a seven-sided cubit. I—"

"What I want to know," Chandra said, her voice uncharacteristically emotional, "are you a hero or aren't you?"

"Well," Starbuck said, "I have to admit that once in a while I've done something that others have considered as, well, on the heroic side, but—"

"Your honesty's getting a little sickening, buddy," Boomer said.

"Well, damn, I've never had to explain something like . . ."

He pointed to his other self, who had turned to confront some evil-looking individuals . . . something like *that* before. See, Chandra, that figure there, even though he has my

name and looks like me and is a pilot and had adventures of a sort and is popular with women, they aren't *my* looks, *my* adventures, *my* piloting skills, even *my* women. I don't even want to be like him. He looks like a bozo to me. I don't know where they got all this or how they know *anything* about me, but this is just a fake, a—"

Starbuck stopped speaking abruptly when he saw the tears spilling out of Chandra's eyes. He glanced at Brynt, who was wiping away some spots of excess moisture from his cheeks. Zossie had buried her face in her mother's skirt. Diova hugged her tightly.

Starbuck was mystified. He looked toward Boomer for an answer, but Boomer was clearly bewildered, too. Helpless, Starbuck knelt beside Chandra. Boomer was moved by the sight of his buddy in a tender pose with the child. Behind them the illusionary Starbuck was flailing his fists about at a bushwhacking bunch of villains. He was knocking them every whichway. Boomer found the conjunction of the compassionate Starbuck with the fake brawling one somewhat disconcerting.

"What's wrong, kids?" Starbuck asked, putting his arms around Chandra. All three children were crying too hard to answer.

Trinzot leaned down toward Starbuck, and said, "I think they're in mourning."

"Mourning?"

"For the Starbuck, the lost Starbuck."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Diova, caressing the side of Zossie's head affectionately, smiled sadly and said, "Much of their imaginative lives is connected to that figure. Their ideas about life, nobility, ethics come from their regular Imagescan entertainment. The Starbuck has been their favorite hero, or Imagescan

character, if you will. He is idealistic, uplifting, a noble character they can look up to."

"They want you to be the Starbuck," Trinzot added. "They're disappointed."

"Hey, kids," Starbuck said, "what's wrong with me? I mean, I'm a Viper pilot, I fight Cylons, I—"

Catching her breath, Zossie asked, "What're Cylons?"

"They're the enemies I battle against." He noticed that the fake Starbuck was now being attacked by a trio of aliens who balanced unevenly on long legs. He pointed to these figures and said, "Like that Starbuck is fighting those blobs on pipestem legs there."

"Do Cylons look like that?" Zossie asked, wide-eyed.

"Well, no, I'm afraid not. But, in their own way, they're just as ugly."

Brynt knelt beside Starbuck and touched his arm shyly.

"And you fight 'em?" he asked, excited.

"I blow 'em out of the skies, disintegrate them on the ground, eat 'em instead of primaries for breakfast."

"Are they eatable?" Zossie asked.

"Well, no, I—"

"Can you tell us about Cylons?" Brynt asked. "Please?"

"Okay, one story, then I'm going to ask you folks to help me. Deal?"

"Help you?" Zossie asked.

"Tell us *now* what you want," Chandra demanded.

"Well, all right. I have some friends. They were brought here today in a ship, unloaded somewhere near here. I need to know where they are."

"That's easy," Chandra said, her voice cool but involved. "We know where."

"Where?"

"We'll tell you. But first, the story."

Starbuck gave Boomer a nervous look.

"Time may be important," he said. "There's a—"

"The story," Chandra said in a way that did not brook further discussion. Behind her, Trinzot and Diova shrugged, telling Starbuck by the gesture that even they didn't dispute a decision from their bright and confident elder daughter.

"We want to hear your story, too," Trinzot said, calmly. "Don't worry. We'll help you, too. And where they are, there's plenty of time."

"The story," Chandra said.

Starbuck sat back on his haunches, nodded, and then said, "I guess you've effectively dried up my vapor trail, kids. Now, it all began this way. I was cruising on patrol in my lonely Viper, thinking thoughts about courage and nobility, when a dozen Cylon raiders came sailing out of nowhere . . ."

Boomer's eyebrows raised and he looked at the ceiling. As Starbuck enthusiastically developed his partially-true tale, mesmerizing his listeners, Boomer noticed that behind him the illusionary Starbuck was fighting a whole field of mean-looking aliens, and nobody in the room was watching him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Starbuck hasn't yet broken commsilence although our telemetry shows that he and his squadron have landed on the planet. I wish I knew what the young lieutenant has on his—"

Commander Adama's dictation was interrupted by the soft sound of his cabin door opening. He glanced up to see Athena in the doorway with Boxey by her side, clinging to her hand. Behind them the daggit-droid, Muffit, peeked around Boxey's legs. He shut off his voicecorder and smiled at his adopted grandson.

"Aren't you up kind of late, Boxey?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep. Didn't want another nightmare. Aunt Athena said I should talk to you."

"What's bothering you, child?" Adama said. "Your father?"

Boxey nodded. "And the others. Starbuck, Boomer. Are they all coming back?"

Receptors in Muffit's control center picked up the boy's sadness and, as programmed, he nuzzled the child a little. Absent-mindedly, Boxey pushed him away and, disengaging himself from his aunt's grip, walked slowly toward Adama's desk.

"I don't want to lie to you, son," Adama said. "I don't know. But I pray they will."

"So do I." Boxey reached the desk and put his hands on its edge. They were tiny and white, very white. Adama regretted that the child could not spend more time on the planets they visited, to get rid of the onship pallor and get some tan.

"Is it always going to be like this, Grandfather? Always some need to go off and fight? I mean, I want to be a

colonial warrior and everything, but . . ."

Athena came to the child's side.

"Boxey," she said, "I told you not to—"

"No," Adama said, "it's all right, Athena." Reaching across the desk, he took Boxey's hands, guided him around the desk, and settled him on his lap. The gentle sound of Adama's voice when he spoke next reminded Athena of conversations he'd had with her as a child, usually after something hurtful had happened.

"You want some time of peace, some time where nobody has to go on patrol, go into combat, be on alert—is that right, Boxey?"

Vigorously, Boxey shook his head yes.

"Well," his grandfather said, "it may surprise you to find this out, but so do I. I grew up in war, spent the best part of my youth in the academy, post-academy training, and the war itself. I got married in my dress uniform. I was a parent only when I could get leave to go home for short periods. And you know what, Boxey?"

"What?"

"I spent a lot of time in my quarters, thinking just the same thoughts you've been thinking, asking myself all the same questions. I wanted to turn my back on it all but I had to do my duty. Just as your father has to do his duty, Starbuck his, and the others theirs."

"And me, mine. Right?"

"Right, young man. I hope your duties aren't the same as ours have been, but I can't promise that. If we reach Earth, perhaps we can find the peace we hope for, on a peaceful planet with peaceful inhabitants. But I just don't know. Now, off to bed with you."

Boxey climbed off his lap, saying, "Okay. Hey, c'mon Muffy."

The child and his mechanical daggit headed for the cabin door. Athena walked slowly after him. At the door, she turned around and blew her father a kiss. In their age-old gesture, Adama caught it. He smiled. After they left, the smile could not last, as his worries about Apollo and the rest returned.

Starbuck felt tiny itches all over his body. He wondered if he was allergic to something in the scratchy clothing Trinzot had given him. Whatever was causing his skin discomfort, he longed for his uniform again. Everything seemed acceptable when he wore his *Galactica* threads, but these functional civilian jobbies gave him a feeling the universe was coming apart.

He scratched his arms restlessly as he crouched with Boomer on a knoll above the vast prison compound. Figures, both alien and humanoid, moved busily in the open areas between the buildings below. There was a military stiffness to the walk of the human figures. The compound was well lit, and they could see the peeling structures scattered with no geometrical order throughout the area. If Chandra was right, Apollo and the others were in the large center building, the one whose windows had been darkened. Starbuck hoped she was right; it would be too dangerous to attempt to search all those buildings for him.

"It's like Trinzot said," Boomer observed. "Not a very formidable challenge physically. We should be able to get in there easily enough."

"Makes sense."

"I fail to see where anything makes sense about this place."

"They don't really care about anybody breaking out. Where would they go? Top of that, they've got most of the planet's population firmly under control. If what Chandra

suggested is correct, the aliens control almost every part of their lives."

"I don't know about that. It might be just a kid's fantasy. Trinzot and Diova don't seem to put much credence into Chandra's speculations."

"Yes, but did you listen to those two? Did you take a good look into their eyes? As pale and glazed as cadet faces on their first solo flight. Look, Boomer, I can't even trust them not to turn us in. That's why I didn't want them along."

"So maybe they're notifying their masters now."

"I'm willing to risk that. There's a good chance they won't, too. They seemed to believe us, or at least be willing to help us. I don't think they're bad. I just think their insides have been used up. You notice how vague they get when they talk about their past?"

"Yeah, I did notice that."

Not far behind them, the children crouched, watching their hero's every move. Starbuck had instructed them to stay behind. If he had known them well, he would have known they'd never follow that kind of order, not when there was an adventure about to happen. After he and Boomer had left, they had sneaked out of their home and, as they had when they'd first seen Starbuck and Boomer, tracked them.

"Now we'll really see something," Brynt said.

"We better," Zossie said, "before I fall asleep. I don't know if I like *this* Starbuck's adventures."

"Zossie," Chandra said, "he's *more* exciting. He's *real*."

"Oh, Chandra, he's just more exciting to you because you got the holster, and the wrapper, and the—"

She also had a piece of fringe from off his uniform, which she'd snipped off after he'd given it up to change into civilian clothes. And she held it now, tight in her right hand.

"Oh, stop it, Zossie!" she said.

Ahead of them Starbuck and Boomer crept forward.

"We've got to get closer," Boomer said, "find a way in."

"Right," Starbuck said.

Crouching, they ran a few steps down a hill, then plunged to the ground. The children raced to their former position and watched them from above.

"What if they get caught?" Brynt asked.

"He's the Starbuck," Chandra said. "He won't get caught."

"Yeah, but what if?"

"We'll get him out, don't worry."

Zossie, who had trailed behind, now joined them, saying sarcastically, "Sure, we'll get him out. Sure. Sure."

Starbuck sensed movement off to his right and cautiously lifted his head to see a group of townspeople traveling along the path leading to the gates of the prison compound. Their steps were slow, but in unison. Their heads faced stiffly forward. Walking in two lines, they carried large packs on their backs. Their eyes were glazed over, their faces slack and expressionless.

"Way they're walking," Boomer commented, "looks like a bunch of zombies."

As they passed by the place where the two warriors crouched, Boomer said, "Take the stragglers?"

"You got it."

The children watched Starbuck and Boomer creep up behind two pack carriers at the rear of the caravan. Quickly and silently they jumped them, hitting them over the heads with the butts of their laser pistols. The two men, who apparently couldn't resist anyway, fell limply to the ground. Starbuck and Boomer dragged them to the side of the path and rapidly slipped the packs off their backs. Carrying the packs themselves, they caught up with the caravan and

took up the positions of the men they'd subdued. They made their eyes as vacant and zombielike as they could, and copied the stiff gait of the other members of the caravan.

"C'mon," Chandra said, standing up suddenly. "Stay low."

"Why?" Brynt asked.

"We're goin' in with 'em."

Brynt's face brightened and he nearly squealed with delight.

"All right!" he said.

"We shouldn't—" Zossie said.

"You stay behind, then," Chandra said, her voice emotionless and cold. She started running down the hill, Brynt right behind her.

Zossie looked around and said, "I'm not staying here!"

She skittered down the hill after them. Remaining low, the three children caught up with the caravan. Starbuck and Boomer, even though their gaze was held forward, saw the children slip easily into the middle of the caravan.

Speaking out of the side of his mouth, Starbuck said, "What're they doin' here?"

"Whatever, we can't stop them now. Get your zombie face back on, bucko."

Chandra smiled back at the two warriors, impressed with their acting skills. They looked just like the other pack carriers. She was disturbed by the vacancy in all those faces. What did it mean? She'd often seen groups of people in this state, and there were times when she half remembered being a zombie herself, without knowing whether or not she'd been dreaming.

During their spying excursions, the children had often come upon lines of these zombies. Usually, they had seemed

to be on errands for the four-armed creatures with whom the humans coexisted in The Joyful Land. There was little interaction between the humans and the creatures, except when the creatures brought new citizens to the land. Yet, Chandra had vague memories of the creatures giving her orders, of herself with her face pressed against the hard surface of a floor just because a creature had ordered her to. Or dancing. Or hitting the face of Brynt or Zossie, or even her parents. They all traveled to some place together and did strange things together, strange things that were only dream memories to her. Did they happen? Were they the reason she seemed to have a sense of lost time so often, a feeling of definite gaps in her life? She wished she could focus more clearly on them, at least know whether they were reality or dreams.

"Okay," she whispered to her brother and sister, "we're near the gate now. Stay small."

"Easy for me," Zossie said.

The caravan stopped in front of the prison gate. A quartet of alien guards opened the gate and examined the caravan, which remained still. Chandra feared they were already discovered. In the rear of the caravan, Starbuck and Boomer couldn't tell what was happening.

The alien in charge made an ugly sound which turned out to be a signal for the caravan to go forward through the gates. The children suffered a tense moment as they slipped in past the guards. Starbuck and Boomer stiffened their bodies as they passed through. The aliens, not expecting any deviation in the caravan, paid scant attention to its members.

"What now, hero?" Boomer muttered.

"Beats me."

The children worked their way forward and, at a gesture from Chandra, darted through the zombie ranks to cover

between two shadowy buildings. When the aliens' attention was elsewhere, they jumped out of their hideaway, seized Starbuck and Boomer, and jerked them into the shadows. The caravan passed out of the yard and into a building.

"Who told you kids you could follow us here?" Starbuck said irritably.

"Nobody," Chandra said. "We go where we want."

"I gathered that. You're in danger."

"And we don't care."

"Hey!" Zossie interjected. "I care!"

"Go home then, tyke," Brynt said angrily.

"Sure," Zossie said, "just waltz out the gate. Thanks a lot, brother."

"Stop the sniping," Chandra ordered. "We got to help the Starbuck."

"Who doesn't need your help," Starbuck said.

"We got you off that caravan, didn't we?" Chandra said proudly. "And we can get you to the cell blocks."

"Just tell us where they are."

"We'll take you there."

"Chandra—"

"Follow us."

With Chandra in the lead, the children skittered down the passageway, keeping close to the buildings. Starbuck and Boomer shrugged and followed them. At the other end of the passage, a guard passed by, sending all the humans pressing harder against the buildings. When they arrived at the end of the passage, they looked out cautiously. In a small quadlike area, a few prisoners walked with a purpose, a couple of guards stood indolently by a wall.

"Where to now?" Starbuck asked Chandra.

"Over there. That's where they put new prisoners."

"Okay," Boomer said. "How do we get there?"

"Look, Boomer," Starbuck said, "we make like those guys, like prisoners on an errand. Just walk across the quad. Look like we know where we're going."

"This is exciting," Brynt whispered to Chandra, "just like an Imagescan."

"Except this time we're in it," Chandra muttered.

"Okay, Starbuck," Boomer said, "I'm ready."

Starbuck turned to the children, saying, "You kids stay here. Right here. Right?"

"Yes, sir," Chandra said, coming to attention like a good subordinate.

"And thanks for the help, pals."

The children, especially Chandra, glowed with pleasure. Squatting in the shadows, they tensely watched Starbuck and Boomer cross the quad. They looked convincing, their walk displaying a clear obedience, their attention directed on their feigned goal.

"We just gonna stay here?" Brynt asked Chandra.

"Of course not. We're following them in."

"Chandra!" Zossie complained. "You lied to the Starbuck!"

"Hush, Zossie," Chandra said. "This is an adventure. It isn't life."

"It's life," Zossie protested. "It's life. They could get killed."

"Bosh! The Starbuck could never get killed."

"Chandra, something's wrong with you. I don't know what, but—"

Chandra's voice became awesomely cold. "Nothing's wrong, idiot. C'mon, we can make our way across by staying close to the buildings. That way."

On the other side of the yard, Starbuck and Boomer reached the door to the building containing the cell blocks.

"What now?" Boomer asked.

"Just walk in."

"Thought you'd say that."

Boomer swallowed hard and followed Starbuck, who gratefully found that the door opened easily. They found themselves in a dark, dreary entry way, in the midst of a horrible musky smell. There was a heavy feeling of dust in the air that made them want to cough. Beyond the entryway was a better-lit anteroom which they went toward, instinctively shaking their hands in front of their faces to clear a way in the dust. One of the aliens sat by a round table in the center of the round anteroom.

"Are you two lost?" he bellowed.

"This isn't the commissary?" Starbuck said.

"What is—" were the only two words the alien got out before Starbuck shot him, his laser pistol set on stun. The alien fell heavily to the floor. Starbuck stood over him and examined his face.

"Ugly fellow, isn't he?" Starbuck said.

"We're probably just as ugly to them."

"Let's take a look around, before he comes to and sounds the alarm."

After traversing a narrow corridor they came to another round room, around which other corridors were placed like spokes in a wheel. They got by the two guards there simply by looking like they knew where they were going. Confidence seemed to be the key for moving about this place, Starbuck thought. The corridors led to cell blocks, and other corridors which led to other cell blocks. Most of the cells were empty.

After several rows of cells, Starbuck felt trapped in a maze, wondering if they'd ever find their way out of the building, much less find Apollo, Chameleon, and the others. Suddenly a familiar voice shouted his name.

"Starbuck! Is it you? Boomer?"

He turned to see Sheba standing on the other side of a cell door, holding on to its iron bars.

"Sheba!"

"Did they capture you, too? How—?"

"Where's Apollo?"

"I don't know where they took him. We were knocked unconscious and—"

"Chameleon, is he here somewhere?"

"Right across there. I heard him. He's been asleep, having nightmares, he's—"

Starbuck didn't wait for Sheba to finish. He rushed across the aisle to look in on Chameleon. The old man was asleep, but squirming. He let out a series of small abrupt groans. Starbuck wanted to crash into his cell and take his father into his arms, but he could not. Right now, his mission was too important. He crossed back to Sheba's cell.

"Sheba," he said, "we're going to let you out."

"There's a guard close by," Sheba said, "right at the end of the corridor there."

"Okay. Boomer, take out the guard."

Boomer nodded and worked his way casually down to the end of the hallway. The guard sat laconically, reading from a scroll written in a strange scrawl-like calligraphy. The alien, sensing Boomer's presence, glanced up. Boomer smiled and raised his lasergun. His shot made the alien double up over his scroll. Boomer went into the room and propped the alien up in his chair, so that he again appeared to be reading.

After he heard Boomer's shot, Starbuck took one of his own at the large chunky lock-box on Sheba's cell door. The lock brightened a little, but nothing else happened.

"Set the gun higher," Sheba said.

Starbuck adjusted the charge and fired again. The lock didn't give, but there was a sizzling sound inside it. He glanced over at Boomer, who stood guard at the end of the hallway.

Sheba pushed at the cell door and felt some give.

"One more shot might do it," she said. "Set it even higher."

"Okay. Back away from the door, Sheba. This high a setting, it could bounce off and hurt you."

He fired again, and the door popped open gently. Sheba scampered out.

"This all took up too much energy," Starbuck said, indicating the charge level gauge on the butt of the pistol. "There's got to be an easier way."

"What should we do?"

"Find Apollo. Get him out, then locate more weaponry."

Starbuck started off toward Boomer. Glancing into Chameleon's cell, he saw the old man turn in his sleep.

"What about Chameleon?" Sheba asked.

He had dreaded the question, but knew it would come. It was hard to admit even to himself that the old man wouldn't be of much use right now.

"Let him sleep," Starbuck said. "We'll get him as soon as we can. There isn't time to spring every lock and then wait for the gun to recharge. First, Apollo. Then the others."

Looking back, he heard Chameleon's voice, still obviously in his dreams, say faintly, "Starbuck."

Starbuck felt his father was calling him back. But he could not go. He had to go on.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Croft, relaxing on the lower bunk, watched Apollo's pacing from the front to the back of the cell with amusement.

"You're wearing a groove in the floor, Apollo."

"So? What's it to you?"

"You been with me too long. You're beginning to sound like me, pal."

"Croft—"

"Take it easy. Relax. You're not getting out of this place tonight."

"Want to bet on that?" Starbuck asked, appearing suddenly on the other side of the cell door. Apollo ran forward.

"Starbuck! Where'd you come from?"

"I took the package tour. You guys all right?"

"Yeah."

Sheba and Boomer materialized at Starbuck's side.

"Blow open the door, Starbuck," Boomer said. "Use my gun this time."

Starbuck took Boomer's laser pistol and aimed it at the lockbox.

"This takes a ton of power," he said. "You guys step back."

Apollo and Croft retreated to the rear of the cell while Starbuck blasted the lock with the pistol set at full power. The lock popped open gently. Croft rushed out, Apollo just behind him.

"No point in hurrying, fellas," Boomer said. "Until these two guns recharge, we have no weapons."

"Where are the guards for this block?" Croft asked.

"Taking a nap," Starbuck responded.

"They got some kind of doohickey weapon on their belts. I can figure out how it works."

Croft seemed as overconfident as usual, Starbuck noticed, but he decided not to start an argument with the volatile former convict. At Croft's gesture, the five of them made their way down the corridor, hugging the sides of the cell block.

"Should we liberate any others?" Apollo asked.

"Can't afford to," Boomer replied. "Takes too much charge. Got to find some other way."

"We will," Croft muttered.

In a cell near the end of the corridor, Maga and Bora heard them coming. Maga positioned himself at the cell door and watched. He let Sheba go by, watched Starbuck pass on the other side of the corridor, then he heard the familiar voice of Apollo approaching his cell.

"You guys know the way out of—"

Maga's massive arms reached through the cell door bars and, seizing Apollo by the throat, pulled him roughly against the door. Apollo began to choke.

"Let us out, too," Maga said.

"What is—" Starbuck said, returning.

"Free us, Warrior."

"We can't, we—"

Maga tightened his hold on Apollo's throat. Blood was draining from Apollo's face.

Croft grabbed the laser pistol from Starbuck's hand.

"Why're you talking to these guys?" he said, pressing the nozzle of the gun between Maga's eyes. "Let the man go or I'll part all the hair on your face, friend."

Croft knew the gun had little or no charge in it, but he'd always been quick with a bluff. Maga squinted at the gun, cross-eyed. He seemed ready to call Croft's bluff, but he abruptly released Apollo, who nearly collapsed coughing. Sheba tended to him. Maga glowered at Croft with a fierce hatred in his deep-set eyes. Croft realized he was now on the growing Nomen blood trail list, too.

"Your primitive use of force is so characteristic of the troops of the *Galactica*, Warrior," Maga growled.

"You call grabbing a guy by the throat and squeezing him to death sophisticated?" Croft said. "And don't call me 'Warrior.' I don't go for that kind of—"

"You going to stand there and dispute words, Croft?" Starbuck said. He looked at Maga. "Listen, fellas, we pull things off, everybody'll be free. You and your people just be patient, all right?"

Maga didn't answer. Instead, he strode back into the shadows of his cell. Croft felt the burning rays of the Noman's eyes even when they couldn't be seen. He turned and followed the others down the corridor.

"You making deals with Nomen?" he whispered to Starbuck. "You should leave 'em here, rotting in their cells."

"Look, Croft," Starbuck said, "those two guys in there tried to kill my—a friend of mine. But they're in the same pickle the rest of us are and deserve the same—"

"Ah, it's no use talking to you *Galactica* pilots. You all buy the pieties of your commander whole-hog. Well, I don't."

"I'm sure you don't. But, if we can help anybody imprisoned here, we will, including these guys, unwholesome though they may be."

In the guard room Starbuck liberated a pair of weapons from the unconscious aliens. He handed them to Croft.

Boomer held up his laser pistol, staring at the gauge on its handle.

"Nearly recharged," he said.

Starbuck inspected his gun.

"This, too," he said.

"Croft better get those contraptions working," Sheba said. "I don't know how much good we can do with two laser pistols among us."

"Croft'll do it," Apollo said. "I'm certain."

Starbuck told Apollo and the others about Chandra and her family, and how they had all helped him and Boomer. His tale was interrupted by Croft's announcement that he could get the alien weaponry functioning.

"Principles of gunnery are about the same everywhere, I guess," he said.

After they had all been instructed by Croft in the use of the alien guns, Apollo said to Starbuck, "I saw a bunch of prisoners in colonial warrior uniform. The uniforms were shredded but recognizable. I think I saw Scarn in the group."

"Scarn?" Starbuck said. "I thought he was a prisoner on Baltar's base-star."

"So did I. But I think he's here someplace now. And others."

"What do you propose, Apollo?" Boomer asked.

"We've got to find a way to break everybody out of here."

Croft threw up his arms in despair.

"Break everybody out?" he cried. "Are you crazy?"

"No, Croft," Starbuck said, "he's right."

Starbuck thought of Chameleon, left behind in his cell, and vowed to himself he would never leave this planet until he had his father with him.

"I'm with you guys," Sheba said.

"Me, too," agreed Boomer.

Croft looked at the loyal quartet angrily.

"You guys always stick together? Okay, I'm in, too. Might as well be killed as a colonial warrior, it'll look good inscribed on my burial capsule."

Croft's reluctance amused Apollo, and he cheerfully offered to shake hands with him. Croft performed the handshake disinterestedly.

"We better *appropriate* a few more weapons, though," he said.

Apollo nodded. A guard behind him began to stir and Boomer quickly raised his handgun and stunned the alien anew.

"Okay," Apollo said. "There must be some kind of control room somewhere in the building. Let's separate into two groups, each with a laser pistol and one of these rifles. You three go one way, Croft and I'll take the other."

Croft smiled.

"Apollo's the only one who can stand partnering with me," he said.

"Let's move out," Apollo ordered, ignoring Croft's sarcasm. Starbuck, with Boomer and Sheba, headed for a staircase leading down to the next level, while Apollo suggested he and Croft explore the floor they were on.

The stairway was dark, the only light coming from an open window at its lower landing. It took the trio of Galacticans some time to descend. When they reached the window, Starbuck stood warily to its side and looked down into the yard.

"Can't tell anything from here," Boomer said, looking over Starbuck's shoulder.

"Seems to me the main area might just be over—"

Starbuck's sentence was interrupted by a commotion in the yard. At first he couldn't discern the source of the ruckus, hearing only the unpleasant sound of alien voices raised in anger. Then a guard strode into the lighted area, dragging the tiny form of Zossie behind him. She began to scream hysterically. Another guard, pulling along Brynt and Chandra, walked behind him.

Taking the children to the center of the yard, they plopped them on the ground and began to ask them questions in high-pitched squawking voices. When the children sullenly refused to answer, the guards grabbed the shoulders of Brynt and Chandra and started to shake them quite roughly. Starbuck screamed in anger, flung the window open wider, and leaped out. He moved so fast that Boomer's hands, reaching out to stop him, just missed his back.

"Starbuck!" Boomer shouted. "No!"

Starbuck landed on his feet in the yard and ran at the interrogating aliens.

"What should we do?" Sheba cried.

Boomer shrugged.

"Join him," he said.

Sheba, following Boomer out the window, landed on the ground just in time to see Starbuck shoot at the guard who was roughing up Chandra. Hit at chest level, the alien flailed his four arms and fell. Sheba got a shot off at the second alien, wounding him in the right leg and causing him to totter. The children were freed and running.

The gunfire attracted other guards who came swooping out of doorways and scampering from between buildings. Boomer, grabbing a rifle from a fallen guard, started shooting wildly. The guards returned fire. Boomer spun

around and laid down a barrage of shots that sent the first wave of guards into retreat.

Chandra, panicked, ran into Starbuck's arms.

"Starbuck," she yelled. "What should we do?"

"Find a way out."

"That way," she said. "There's none of them over that way."

Sheba and Boomer joined Starbuck and the children. The aliens, recovered from their retreat, advanced again. Starbuck, Boomer, and Sheba presented a shield to the attackers, protecting the children, who were scrambling for safety in the shadows between two buildings. When they were out of sight, the three colonial warriors rushed after them. As they came out of the alley, two guards jumped down from a second-story window. One of them started firing, while the other seized Zossie. Boomer dropped the guard with the gun, while Starbuck, enraged, grappled with the other. He snatched Zossie out of the guard's arms and nearly flung her to Sheba. Bringing his lasergun up to fire, he was unaware of two more guards jumping out of a doorway. One of them hit Starbuck on the back of his head, and he blanked out immediately, falling to the ground heavily, his pistol bouncing across the ground to the feet of a guard.

Boomer, who'd followed Sheba and the children to a different alleyway, took a step back, toward his fallen comrade.

"Starbuck!" he cried.

Sheba, seeing guards pouring out of the buildings around them, grabbed at Boomer's arm and shouted, "We can't help him now. We've got to get out of here."

They followed the children down another alley.

Soon there was a large group of the Image Lord guards standing in a circle around the unconscious Starbuck, staring down at him with detached scientific interest.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lucifer had a notion to short-circuit the Image Lords' entire operation. If he could figure out how to do it, a task that did not seem so formidable since their technology was not especially complicated, he might become a culture hero just like the Starbuck. On the other hand, he had no desire to be disconnected by a vengeful Image Lord. Still, even that might be a suitable revenge for their arrogance in testing him.

If he had not developed his sensory abilities he would not have been able to sense them trying to force his will to theirs. The waves that reached him from their machines were strong, almost overpowering, but the built-in protective blocks in his circuitry prevented them from making him their slave. Apparently Spectre's technological base was not as firm because he seemed to be already under their direction. Of course, his obsequious treatment of them might be due to his own need for advancement wherever he was.

Only an expert Cylon scientist could effect any fundamental changes in Lucifer, except in the areas where he had learned to redesign and reprogram himself. Theoretically, he might some day even prevent the Cylons from tampering with him, although so far he hadn't been able to penetrate the deepest locks to alter the very basic features of his design.

With a rush, the Image Lords' meddlings ended. He felt a sense of relief as he rose from the bench where Crutch had left him so long ago. As if in reaction to his move, Crutch entered the room, his four arms waving in excitement, the hair on his face rippling from the speed of his entrance.

"A little excitement in the cell blocks, mate," he said. "Thought you'd be interested."

He took Lucifer down several corridors to the room with several monitors, all with different pictures on them. Spectre was already there, his attention focused on one of the screens. Crutch stopped in front of the screen and proudly pointed to the image upon it. Lucifer saw a man, apparently unconscious and lying on a slablike display platform, surrounded by a jungle of technical equipment.

For a moment, Lucifer was confused then, recognizing the man, he blurted out, "Starbuck!"

"It is, then," Crutch said, satisfied. "The hero you were telling me about, the one from the Imagescan adventures. I thought it looked like him."

"He is one of the *Galactica's* most famous pilots," Spectre said. Whenever he spoke now, he directed his comment at Crutch or one of the other Image Lords.

Crutch laughed his horrendous room-shaking laugh.

"Looks like we caught a big one this time," he said smugly. "You fellows are going to have to tell us all about this Starbuck."

"Well," Lucifer said, "I really can't—"

"I would be happy to," Spectre announced.

Taking the lower of Crutch's right arms, Spectre led him away, babbling all the time about the legendary *Galactica* pilot, Starbuck. Lucifer wondered what the Image Lords' plans for Starbuck might be. What special use could a human hero be put to? Could they force him to act in his own Imagescans? If he survived, that is. He looked dead just now. An Image Lord stuck a long needle into his arm and he stirred. His eyes opened, and he blinked several times as he tried to adjust to his new surroundings.

"Oh, God, my head feels like—what's happening? Where am I?"

He saw a particularly gruesome version of an alien clomp into the room, followed by a robotlike individual in fancy robes. For a moment, Starbuck thought he recognized this creation as Lucifer, from Baltar's base-star, then he saw the design of the face was different. Anyway, Lucifer wouldn't have had such execrable taste in clothes.

Starbuck tried to sit up, but his head pounded with pain and forced him to lie back.

"Relax, soldier," Crutch said. "You're with us now. We're mighty happy to meet you. Happy to meet anyone so famous. Your reputation has preceded you, you see."

Starbuck groaned.

"You watch those ridiculous three-D things, too."

"Nope. But I know about 'em. My kind makes 'em, mate."

"You're quite the hero on this planet, Starbuck," Spectre said.

"Who are you?" Starbuck asked. "Have we met?"

"Only in a way. Not really. But almost, once."

"I don't get it."

"You don't have to. It was a long time ago."

Some images came into Starbuck's mind. A planet he'd crashed on, a bunch of children fighting some fake Cylons led by a cybernetic creation he'd only seen at a distance.

"I do remember. Mira, and the other children, you were the —"

"That is correct," Spectre said.

"It seems," Crutch commented, "you get mixed up with children often, Starbuck. I'm told you were caught during an incident involving children."

"You guys get your kicks mauling kids, do you?"

Crutch's laugh made Starbuck's back muscles contract involuntarily. It was the kind of horrendous sound that could

break glass and kill small animals.

"Mercy me," Crutch said merrily, "we never would hurt children of any species. Sometimes our security forces get a little overzealous."

"Overzealous? They were going to smash them against—"

"Smash? No, mate. We have to reinforce the lesson with them, and they *were* trespassing, but we'd never hurt children. No more than they deserved, anyway. We're not a particularly violent people, we Image Lords."

Spectre glided to Starbuck's platform. He leaned slightly toward him, looking like a mechanical doctor about to make a diagnosis.

"Crutch speaks the truth," he said. "The Image Lords are a benign and benevolent people. A wonderful people. I have seen."

He gave Crutch a quick sneaky glance, to make sure he had scored the necessary points with his captor. Lucifer, watching the events on his monitor screen, was perplexed. He did not know where his allegiances lay, with this heroic human who was the sworn enemy of the Cylons or, like Spectre, with this cheerfully cold-hearted crew who manipulated the lives of individuals they stole from ships and other planets.

"There were others with you," Crutch said to Starbuck, "warriors from the *Galactica*. I'm instructed to ask you, where are they now?"

"Afraid I don't know. Wish I did. Not that I'd tell you if I did."

"No matter, friend. We'll find 'em."

Maga's rage had been growing since the humans had departed. Bora recognized the signs of blood trail lust, a state he hadn't observed in Maga in a long time, not since

he first established the blood hunt against Chameleon, then known to the Nomen as Captain Dimitri.

Maga's eyes had become starkly fierce, shifting into a radiant dark violet color. His skin had slowly purpled with some blotchy spots growing and joining like amoeba. As in all blood lusts, emotion had thickened his body. He not only seemed larger, but taller. The abrupt little moans in his throat told Bora to keep quiet and stay out of his way. Maga would do *something* soon.

Suddenly the chief Borellian Noman made his move. Screaming, his voice rattling the bars of the cell, he hurled himself at the cell door. In spite of its efficient and difficult lock, its bars trembled, definitely bending under the weight of Maga's thrust. Maga retreated to the rear of the cell, where he crouched, working up the fury for his next assault on the cell door. His eyes, peering out beneath his hairy thick brow, appeared to send out rays. His skin darkened to a deeper purple.

"Again," Bora urged, "do it again, Maga."

Maga leaned back toward the wall, then suddenly hurtled forward. This time the bars creaked and cracked under the force of impact, but still the door did not give. They must be made of very strong stuff, Bora thought. Incensed Borellian Nomen could break down almost anything.

Again, Maga crouched in the rear of the cell, readying himself for his next run at the door. Bora began to fear that Maga would hurt himself if he continued.

"Maga, perhaps you shouldn't—"

Paying scant attention to Bora's cautionings, Maga rushed at the cell door. The entire cell rocked with reverberations from the collision of Noman and iron structure. There was a moment when the door merely shook, then it opened with a light clicking sound. Maga's momentum carried him across the corridor. He bounced off the opposite cell door, creating

a deep Noman shaped outline in the bars. The Nomen inside were rocked backward. Maga grabbed that door and wrenched it open. Brega and Lingk ran out of their cell.

"The man they call Chameleon . . ." Maga muttered ominously.

"Yes, Maga?" Bora asked as he eased himself out of their cell.

"He is ours. We will find him."

His feet hitting the floor heavily as he walked, sending loud metallic echoes throughout the building, Maga took the first steps of his renewed blood trail. The other Nomen followed, looking for Chameleon in each cell they passed.

Apollo and Croft had traced the throbbing sounds of machinery to the center of the prison building. Now they stood by a large iron door.

"I think it's on the other side," Apollo said.

"Open the door?" Croft asked.

"If you can."

Croft examined the door and discovered a lever near the top, one that would have been easily within the long-armed reach of an Image Lord. Standing on Apollo's interlocked fingers, he managed to get his hands on it and jiggle it a little. The door opened inward. Croft and Apollo took simultaneous deep breaths and passed through the doorway.

All of the Nomen moved through the corridors purposefully, but none so fiercely as Maga. With the passion of the blood trail radiating from his eyes, he scrutinized every cell for Chameleon.

Brega, who had rushed ahead of the others, yelled back, "I think I may have found the man you seek, Maga."

Maga loped forward to where Brega stood. He stopped in front of the door and peered at the sleeping man inside the cell.

"That is he," he announced ominously. He shook the bars of Chameleon's cell violently, crying, "Wake up, Chameleon."

Chameleon's eyes shot open.

"What—?"

"It is time, Chameleon or Captain Dimitri or whoever you are. I have come for you."

Chameleon sprang out of his bunk and crouched against the far wall, watching Maga shake and bend the bars.

With the children, Boomer and Sheba had reached the overlook above the prison compound. All sign of pursuit had vanished. In the yard below them they watched aliens and prisoners run around in confusion.

"They're looking for us," Chandra said.

"Lucky you knew a way out, kid," Boomer said.

"Chandra can always find a way out," Zossie proudly announced.

"A lucky talent, Chandra," Sheba remarked.

"Useful for adventures," Chandra said.

"Adventures?"

"Like this one."

Sheba glanced questioningly at Boomer. Whispering so that the children couldn't hear him, he told her about the Imagescan and the Starbuck's escapades.

When Sheba realized what Chandra had meant, she turned to the child and protested, "But, Chandra, this isn't an adventure, like in your Imagescan. This is *real*."

"I don't know what you mean by real."

"I mean, this is dangerous. We could die. You could die."

"Oh, no. I don't believe that."

Sheba, distracted by the events in the yard, gave up. None of the others squatting on the overlook noticed how nervously Chandra was handling the piece of fringe from Starbuck's jacket. Nor did they perceive her painful confusion.

Apollo and Croft leaped into the cell block control room. The three aliens at the bank of consoles reacted quickly. Firing their weapons, which emitted a strangely purplish beam unlike any Apollo had ever seen before, they nearly downed their intruders. But Croft and Apollo were more accurate marksmen and the three aliens were soon sprawled on the floor of the control room.

"You all right?" Apollo asked Croft.

"Sure. These guys don't shoot much better than Cylons."

"We better act quickly. They're just stunned, I think. No telling what that weapon you're holding actually does."

Puzzled, Croft stared at the unfamiliar devices which the aliens had operated.

"What'll we do now?" he asked.

"Well, we can't run the place. So we'll destroy as much equipment as we can. Use their guns."

Picking up the fallen weapons, Apollo and Croft fired steadily, sending up sparks and tiny flames from the equipment. On screens above, they saw cell doors popping open, apparently in cell blocks all over the prison. Dazed prisoners were staggering out into the halls.

Maga's pressure on the door of Chameleon's cell was beginning to bring results. The bars of the door were

bending, and there was almost room for him to squeeze through. Chameleon edged forward, knowing that his chance for survival did not lie in cowering at the rear of his cell.

Just as Maga pulled strongly at the door, the damage wrought by Apollo and Croft in the control center had its effect on Chameleon's cell. The door sprung open, surprising Maga and the other Nomen. Maga fell back against the cell across the way, knocking over Brega and Lingk.

Chameleon, assessing the situation quickly, ran out of his cell. He scooted between the fallen Nomen and Bora, and ran down the hallway. The Nomen were slow to react.

Maga, recovering, shouted in a voice that shook the cell block: "Get him!"

The Nomen started after Chameleon. Their pursuit was hampered by the fact that, all along the corridor, cell doors were springing open. Prisoners coming out interfered with the progress of the Nomen.

Croft stared proudly at the damage he and Apollo had performed in the control center. Both men smiled at the havoc in the corridors that was shown on the many screens above the ruined equipment.

"I think we did it, Apollo."

"Yep."

"What now?"

"Find a bloody way out of here."

"With you on that, pal."

They rushed through the still-open control center doorway.

Boomer and Sheba watched the chaos in the yard below with fascination. Prisoners were spilling out of all the

buildings. The alien guards seemed dumbstruck and not sure what to do. They made futile efforts to control the crowd, but the prisoners forcefully pushed their captors out of the way.

"I do believe that's the handiwork of Apollo and Croft," Boomer commented.

"You see them anywhere?" Sheba asked.

"The Starbuck'll save them, don't worry," Chandra said.

"Chandra," Sheba said, "this isn't one of your—"

Chandra's voice turned cold and forbidding. "The Starbuck will save them."

Sheba looked back at the prison yard. The madness there had grown. However, the aliens were getting rougher, pulling prisoners away from the mob and flinging them toward any wall. Nevertheless, the front ranks of the rioting crowd had begun pushing through the gate.

"Look at that, will ya?" Boomer said.

"Boomer," Sheba shouted. "Over there. It's Chameleon!"

"Moves well, doesn't he? Graceful as a—"

"But behind him! It's the Nomen!"

While most of the prisoners were skittering about, looking for any way out, the Nomen strode forward purposefully, slowly, their eyes fastened on their prey. They pushed aside anyone, prisoner or alien, who got in their way. A few Image Lords were knocked unconscious by Nomen fists.

Chameleon, looking behind him with fear in his eyes, stumbled over a fallen prisoner.

"Oh, no!" Sheba cried.

Boomer stood up.

"What're you doing, Boomer?"

"We've got to help him!"

"But—"

Boomer had already started running down the hill, kicking up rocks as he went. Sheba followed. Below her, she saw the Nomen closing in on Chameleon. There surely wasn't enough time for her and Boomer to intervene.

"What's happening, Chandra?" Brynt asked, moving to her side.

"This is the best Imagescan adventure I've ever seen," Chandra said.

"But Chandra, you heard what they said. This isn't an—"

"Shut up, Brynt."

Knowing it was no use to question his sister further, Brynt watched the riot in silence. Zossie came up silently behind them, enthralled by the events, but baffled because she had no idea what was happening.

Maga and Bora, their companions just behind them, bore down on their prey. Chameleon wriggled backward, terrified by Maga's menacing and confident look. He tried to get to his feet, but they wouldn't work properly, and he fell back. He felt the hard surface of a wall against his back. There was no place to run.

"Do you say prayers?" Maga asked, with apparent calm. "Say them now, Chameleon!"

He raised his arms straight up, the blood hunt killing gesture. Chameleon tried to push through the wall in back of him. Maga's arms came down, his hands closing into fists.

Next to Chameleon, a door crashed open and Crutch came into the yard. Intervening himself between Maga and his prey, he seized the Noman's arms, stopping their downward arc. Crutch's strong grip brought pain into Maga's face.

"Stand back, mate," Crutch said, freeing Maga's arms. "The gentleman there is under my protection."

Maga reached from his bandoleer to pluck off a laser bolt, forgetting that all the Nomen had been disarmed of their weapon belts before being thrown into their cells. Cursing, he stood his ground.

"We don't know who you are," Maga said, "but anyone interfering in a blood trail may be killed along with the prey. Stand aside."

Crutch did not move. Maga lunged forward. Using all his arms, Crutch stopped the force of Maga's thrust, picked him up, and threw him back at the other Nomen. They all fell, astonished by the pirate's strength.

Speaking in his own guttural language, Crutch ordered guards to surround the Nomen, then he turned to Chameleon, whose mouth was still open in astonishment at his rescue, and helped the man up.

"You were on the pirate ship," Chameleon said.

"That's right, chum."

"Why did you save me? I mean, with all the rioting and—"

"Seems you have a friend. When this little fracas started, we saw all you fellows come rushing into the yard, and your friend recognized you. He seemed afraid for you, especially when he saw these lugs going after you. I didn't want him unhappy, so I stepped in. Seemed like the friendly thing to do. Come with me."

"Where we going?"

"To see your friend. In here, mate."

Entering the building, he saw Lucifer and Spectre watching him closely. He wondered what their interest was in him.

Boomer stayed out of the way of the fleeing prisoners as much as possible. Sheba ran behind him. Near the prison walls, a figure arose suddenly out of the shadows in front of Boomer. It grabbed Boomer and knocked him to the ground. Sheba halted, ready to fire.

The figure came partially into the light. Both Boomer and Sheba saw that it was Apollo. Croft appeared right behind him, smiling oddly.

"Don't know where you were heading, Boomer," Apollo said, "but we were of the opinion it was in the wrong direction."

"It's Chameleon. They were—"

"I know. We saw. There's nothing we can do now. But don't worry. The Nomen didn't get him. The aliens did."

Boomer got up, saying, "And Starbuck."

"What? How?"

Boomer explained how Starbuck had been captured while trying to save the children.

"Where are the kids now?"

"Up there, top of that knoll."

"Let's get far away from here, then figure out what to do next."

Gathering the children, they headed for Euphoria. The city's lights were soft and peaceful in the calm night of The Joyful Land.

As they entered the children's neighborhood, they heard the soft buzzing noise of the Summoning. The warriors from the *Galactica* felt a vague discomfort at the sound, but nothing else. The children, however, immediately went into a trance and hurried away.

"Where are they going?" Croft said.

"Did you see their eyes?" Sheba asked. "They looked dazed, they just brushed past us as if we weren't here."

"Did you guys feel anything?" Boomer asked.

"Yeah," Apollo said, "something."

"My head's a little dizzy," Croft said.

"Me, too," Sheba said.

Standing on the sidewalk, they saw all the neighborhood families leave their homes and congregate in the middle of the road. Glassy-eyed, the people walked in a slow rhythm.

"What in Kobol's going on?" Boomer said.

"I don't know," Apollo said, "but I think we'll follow. Stay out of sight."

They followed the zombie parade quietly, following it to the multidomed building where they joined other groups from other parts of the city. The ranks and rows of people filed silently into the building, moving, it appeared, by rote.

"I don't get it," Croft said. "Some sort of ritual?"

"Maybe," Apollo said. "Let's find out."

"How?"

"Go in there."

"Are you crazy?"

"Probably. But let's go. You and me, Croft. Boomer, you and Sheba stay outside, cover us if necessary."

Croft wiped his sweating hands on the front of his jacket, and said, "I'm not going in there."

Apollo stared at him. His dark blue eyes were fierce, determined.

"Yes, I am," Croft said. "I am going in there."

Duplicating the blank stares of the people, Apollo and Croft joined the procession, inserting themselves into a

space next to Trinzot and Diova. Boomer and Sheba gazed at them all the way, until they vanished into the building.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Chameleon was flabbergasted to find Starbuck sitting on a couchlike piece of furniture, apparently designed for alien leisure (double-tiered armrests), in a room just off the prison's command center. Crutch guided Chameleon into the room, with Lucifer and Spectre just behind him. Chameleon blinked back tears when he first saw his son.

"Starbuck! What are you doing here?"

"I'm not sure."

Starbuck wanted to embrace his father, but he was damned if he would show such affection in front of a rude alien and two walking computers.

"Your friend has privileged status here," Crutch said. "He's a hero of the culture we control."

Chameleon shook his head in confusion.

"This will take some explanation," he said.

"Sit down," Starbuck said, gesturing to a place beside him. As Chameleon sat, Starbuck glanced toward the doorway and said, "Lucifer?"

Lucifer glided forward, saying, "Yes, Starbuck?"

"Explain."

"Well, this will take some time . . ."

Apollo and Croft followed the children and their parents down long brightly-lit tubelike corridors. Nobody paid the intruders any attention.

Suddenly Trinzot took an abrupt right turn, leading his group away from the others and into a dim room. The contrast between the brightness of the corridor and the

darkness of the room made it difficult for Apollo and Croft to see for a moment, but both resisted blinking too obviously.

The first thing they saw was the image bubble hanging in the center of the room. Attractive abstract splotches of color were floating slowly within it. The colors of the splotches were soft and slowly changing.

It was clear that Trinzot's family and the other families were taking up prearranged positions. Apollo and Croft squeezed in between the children and the next family, and tried to look like them. This was the moment they'd most likely be detected, Apollo thought. But nothing happened. Everyone stood still and stared intently at the image bubble. The people seemed hypnotized, their eyes blank as they stared at the abstractions. Their bodies were relaxed, but immobile. Their faces were slack, expressionless.

Croft muttered out of the side of his mouth, "This is eerie, positively eerie."

"It's like the life's been drained out of them."

"I've seen people look like this. In prison. But never a whole cityful."

The abstractions in the bubble began to change. An azure and scarlet pattern faded as a voice thundered out from the bubble and resounded through the chamber: "*Fall!*"

Croft was knocked off his feet by Trinzot plunging against him. Apollo tripped over Zossie, who fell at his feet. Chandra's head bumped against Apollo's, and Croft suddenly found himself buried beneath the stomach of a rather large woman who had been standing behind him.

As Apollo came out of his daze, he twisted around and saw the Image Lord's hairy face and body inside the bubble. He was fascinated anew by the repellent hanging strips all over the alien's body. It looked to Apollo as if the creature's skin was being peeled off.

Croft managed to squeeze his head sideways so he could breathe. He whispered Apollo's name.

"Here, Croft."

"What's going on?"

"You tell me."

"I can't see anything, how can I—"

"Today we will hop," said the alien in the bubble. "You all like to hop, I am sure. Stand up!"

The people, Croft and Apollo with them, quickly got to their feet. They began to hop, actively, frenetically. Feeling quite ridiculous, Croft and Apollo tried to imitate their movements.

"Haven't done anything like this since a mandatory aerobics class back on the grid barge," Croft said.

"It's good for you. You look out of shape."

"How'd you like your nose for dessert? In red sauce."

Apollo tried not to smile at Croft's cheerfully spoken threat. However, since everyone else in the room performed their hopping with such intensely serious faces, he resisted his impulse. It was certainly a struggle to maintain the vacant appearance that was so natural to the others in the room.

The hopping went on for a long time. Croft thought he would drop from it. He longed to fall down again, if only to get some rest. Then the Summoner ordered: "Stop hopping! Cry!"

"Cry?" Croft muttered. "How'm I going to cry? I haven't cried since I was a kid."

All around them the people were bawling. Apollo, his eyes already tearful, leaned toward Croft and said, "Cry, Croft."

Croft did a creditable imitation of crying. The sound of his bawling, although a trifle overacted, was the loudest in the

room.

"That is all very good," the Summoner said. "Now is the time for dancing. Dance!"

The dance, a kind of free-form set of movements with a certain elegance to its movements, generally allowed the participants to circle the room. Croft and Apollo joined easily and imitated the steps they saw. Apollo noted that Croft moved more gracefully than one might have expected from him. Cynics often danced well, Apollo thought.

"Stop dancing!" the Summoner said. Everybody stopped immediately, resuming their zombielike stance. Croft, caught off guard, nearly stumbled and fell, but recovered well.

"Now . . . kick," the Summoner said.

Not expecting this order, Croft took a good kick in the leg from Chandra. It sent pain shooting up his leg. He had an urge to plant his foot in her stomach, and he reared his leg back, but found he couldn't follow through. Next to him, Apollo kicked an adult in the calf.

"You have to kick," Apollo whispered to Croft.

"I don't want to. I don't like kicking."

"Kick."

Croft kicked Apollo in the backside.

"Good," Apollo said, wincing from the pain. He realized nobody else was reacting to pain, and he struggled to control his face when Croft then kicked him in the shin.

"Stop!" the Summoner said. Again, the people went back to their blank-eyed position.

"I don't think I can survive much more of this," Croft said out of the side of his mouth.

"It's weird, all right. Seems these people are all under the control of these aliens."

"But to what purpose?"

"I don't know. It doesn't look like there's any purpose. It's just a game to them. A bunch of random orders, at the whims of that creep in the bubble."

The Summoner seemed to lean out of the bubble and, for a moment, Apollo wondered if the being was about to expose him and Croft as intruders. Instead, the alien said softly, even kindly, "Everyone, clear your minds. The schedule for tomorrow. Everyone will awaken promptly at dawn. Your morning meal will be . . ."

The Summoner detailed a rather complete day's schedule. While Apollo noticed that the schedule offered some opportunity for individual behavior, it was clear that the life of the city's citizens was strictly organized. The Summoner ordered several specific persons to participate in a riot at a food store, giving each individual a role to play in the violence. Then he told one man that he'd take a gun and stalk another. A woman was told to go into a rage, condemn her family, and break a whole lot of dishes while doing it. The Summoner reeled off a long list of names, enjoining these men and women to attend a sports event at the Northern Park, where they would, in reaction to a certain incident on field, all erupt in erratic protest. This protest would finally involve attacking officials and making it impossible for the players to continue the game.

The Summoner's orders continued for a long while. Each new command seemed more absurd to Apollo than the last. Much of what he told the people to do involved physical or emotional pain, sometimes both—what was the point of it all?

After a final cursory prayerlike invocation to eternal happiness and satisfaction, the Summoner's figure was replaced by new pastel abstractions, and the people began filing out of the room. Croft and Apollo took their place in

line and stayed there until they were back on the streets, where it was clear that the people were returning to their homes. At a convenient shadowy spot, Apollo and Croft split from their group and found their way back to Boomer and Sheba.

"What'd you see?" Boomer asked them eagerly.

With footnotes from Croft, Apollo detailed their experience inside the multidomed building.

"It's obvious the people are under the aliens' control," he said. "But it's curious."

"Why?" Sheba asked.

"I don't know. It's all so pointless. So trivial. A game without much meaning. All these aliens, these Image Lords, do is schedule their days, invent a few events for them, a few departures from the norm, and stage a few odd and cruel little comedies. There isn't any clear political or economic purpose in all of it. They're like children playing a game."

"Yeah," Boomer said, "like Chandra and the others watching the Starbuck on an adventure."

Apollo, puzzled, said, "You'll have to explain that one, Boomer."

Boomer told Apollo about the Imagescan adventures that were at the heart of the children's lives. Apollo whistled, and then said, "It's like boxes within boxes. The aliens manipulate the people. The people manipulate imaginary people. Maybe the imaginary people have little creatures they manipulate, and so on."

"Crazy," Boomer observed.

"You're telling me," Croft said.

"These people, Trinzot and Diova, and the children, can you find their home again, Boomer?"

"I think so."

"Lead on."

As they went through the neighborhood, watching some of the people lounging on their porches or at rest and recreation in their homes, it seemed to them that the city itself seemed illusory, a meticulously-planned game where living games were being used as playing pieces, and moved along and across a complicated board.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chameleon and Starbuck took a long time getting used to each other again. They'd start a conversation, then find themselves stuttering, then slipping into silence. On the other side of the room, Lucifer and Spectre watched them, along with the alien from the pirate ship.

"How are you?" Starbuck asked. "They hurt you?"

"Not really. Wasn't enough time."

Starbuck peered into Chameleon's eyes, saw a sadness there that disturbed him.

"You're well?" he asked.

"Well as can be," Chameleon said. "Under the circumstances. You?"

"Not bad. Got knocked around a little. A couple of drums going inside my head. You know."

"Yes. I know."

They both fidgeted, tried to dislodge the words caught in their throats.

"Been a long time," Starbuck said.

"Yes. I miss our visits."

"Me, too. I—"

For a while, Starbuck couldn't say it. The words would come to him, but he couldn't speak them. He said a lot more about not much at all. Finally, he took a deep breath and said, his voice higher than normal, "Cassie told me."

Chameleon felt like leaving the room. He approached the subject cautiously, "Told you? What? Precisely what?"

"Who you are. Who you *really* are."

"I'm, well, afraid I—"

"Don't dodge me, father. God, it sounds funny to say that word again. When I thought you were my father before, I used to love to have the word roll around my tongue. Now it feels strange."

Chameleon wasn't yet ready to give in.

"Maybe because it isn't true," he said.

Starbuck smiled, and with the tips of his fingers touched Chameleon's sleeve.

"Don't try to wiggle out of it, old man. Look, this time I'm not going to give up my warrior status, I promise. She told me that was why you made her lie about the test results."

Chameleon looked left and right, as if searching for the words to say.

"Well, yes," he said finally, "I, uh, I didn't want to have you do something foolish . . . for me . . . wreck your career . . ."

"Are we going to play standoff, or will you come here and give your son a hug?"

"Well, I'm not used—"

Starbuck's voice dropped to a whisper.

"It's not hard."

Chameleon walked forward slowly, feeling weights dragging his feet. He and Starbuck embraced. Starbuck's grip was strong. Pressed together, neither saw the other's tears.

Lucifer, who had been ignoring the urgent conversation between Spectre and Crutch, kept his attention on the two humans. He found their embrace curious. What did it mean? he wondered. Why do these two embrace? Where does Starbuck know this lithe and graceful old man from? Why had it been so important to him that the man be saved?

"This Starbuck is quite the gambler," Spectre was saying. "Lucifer told me. Not only that, he taught Lucifer the human

custom of card-playing. And beat him."

Lucifer ordinarily would have been annoyed by Spectre's devious comments, but he had become used to Spectre and his sly ways.

"You now can beat the human, can't you, Lucifer?" Spectre said.

"Probability factors indicate such a result."

"You can beat him."

"Interesting," Crutch said. "We like games. Maybe we can arrange one between you, Lucifer, and this Starbuck."

Lucifer did not want to admit that he would be thrilled to play Starbuck again. His memories of his card-playing sessions with Starbuck were pleasant. A rematch seemed desirable. It would give Lucifer an opportunity to test his new insights into the games. He had longed for that opportunity, but never expected it to come. Since Starbuck was here, and he was, and they were both detained as prisoners, why not a game indeed?

"That would be . . . good," Lucifer said cautiously. "I would like a rematch with Starbuck."

"Yes," Crutch said, "I'm beginning to get excited by the idea. But the stakes are important."

"Stakes? They're not necessary. It is the playing of the game that counts, not its stakes."

"Maybe for you, mate, but not anyone else in this wretched universe. If this Starbuck's the gambler you say he is, he'll want high stakes, too. No gambler plays for the fun of it. I'll have to consult with my own mates on this one. Back soon, chums."

Crutch ambled off. He looked more ludicrous than ever to Lucifer, his whole body design so inefficient that it was remarkable that he, or any other Image Lord, could function. Perhaps that was why they played with the lives of others so

enthusiastically—because they themselves were such maladroitly designed creatures, they were able to ignore their own physical drawbacks by manipulating other, better-designed beings.

Spectre glided to Lucifer's side and spoke to him like a conspirator, "Do you also know how to cheat at the human's game, Lucifer?"

"There will be no need to cheat."

"We shall see about that, won't we?"

Spectre left his side to see where he could next position himself to advantage. Lucifer wondered what Spectre had meant by his last observation. The depth of the creature's duplicity could simply not be measured.

He looked back at Starbuck and Chameleon, who were now quite actively talking. They seemed to be enjoying each other's company. There was a curious warmth between them, the kind of human interchange that fascinated Lucifer. No, it was more than fascination, he realized. It attracted him, tempted him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Adama stood by the starfield, gazing at The Joyful Land's star system. He was worried, as was everyone else on the bridge. Turning away from the immense starfield, he called out loudly, "Tigh?" Colonel Tigh left his duties at the flight console and strode to the open center of the control room. "Any word from Apollo, Starbuck, any of them?"

"Nothing. Last communication was the one from Bojay, saying Apollo had been freed but Starbuck captured."

"So much time has gone by, they could all be . . ."

Athena, who had silently gone to her father's side, startled him a bit when she whispered, "Don't say it. They're all right. I know it."

Adama smiled sadly.

"I wish I had your faith."

"You must. I learned it from you."

"Should we send someone else in?" Tigh asked.

"No," Adama replied, "I think not. Bojay's message said specifically that Apollo required time, that they would contact us again when they needed us. They'll contact us soon."

"And until then?" Athena asked.

"Until then we wait."

"See?" Athena observed. "I told you I learned faith from you."

Apollo had made Trinzot's home his headquarters. Instead of hiding from the spy devices of the Image Lords, Apollo strived to act naturally in front of them. Wearing clothing Trinzot had given him, he appeared to be a normal citizen of

the city, perhaps even a member of the family. Croft, Boomer, and Sheba, together with several of the pilots from Starbuck's squadron had been deployed into various households in Euphoria, all of them, like Apollo, striving to integrate themselves into the normal routines of the city. So far none of them had been detected.

It had been difficult to win Trinzot and Diova over to Apollo's side. They at first didn't believe that they were manipulated by the Image Lords. Apollo had won his point by slugging Trinzot at the signal of the Summoning. When Trinzot came to, the others in his family had already responded to the Summoning. Apollo rushed him to the multidomed building, where the two watched Trinzot's family along with other citizens of the city, all zombies now, file into the building. Trinzot's absence at the Summoning Ceremony hadn't been noticed, since Bojay had worn the man's clothes and posed as him.

Trinzot had managed to convince several of his trusted friends and neighbors that Euphoria was under Image Lord domination. Some of them had already realized that something about their lives was strange and out of their own control. These few citizens, along with the warriors from the *Galactica*, had become, Apollo realized, a rather formidable fighting group. And they would fight, soon. They couldn't continue the charade of obedience much longer.

The children, early converts to the cause, performed spying missions for the newly formed rebel forces. Chandra, especially skilled at the art of moving around undetected, had already discovered that Starbuck and Chameleon were in privileged quarters. She'd also seen Lucifer and Spectre, without being able to even guess who or what they might be. Apollo recognized Lucifer from Chandra's description.

She also reported that the Image Lords were planning something for Starbuck, but she couldn't, in her eavesdropping, discern what it was. She thought she heard

the strange creature called Spectre mention a game. Apollo, to whom the entire Joyful Land seemed an elaborate game, was puzzled by the information.

The Galacticans had now been integrated into the Euphorian society for several of the planet's days. Unused to the unusual comfort and distractions they found in the lives of the city's citizens, many of them were enjoying themselves immensely. For them it was a vacation from the stresses of flying endless patrols for the *Galactica*.

Well, Apollo thought, the vacation would soon be over. As if in response to that thought, Trinzot came into the living room, Chandra right behind him. He whispered, to avoid the eavesdropping devices of the Image Lords.

"The word has gone out. Many more than I'd suspected are willing to help us."

"I didn't expect such cooperation," Apollo said.

"We all remember some parts of our past lives, though not clearly. We realize we haven't had lives of our own since we were abducted from our home planets. We want to regain our freedom, with all of its hardships."

Apollo grinned.

"A noble speech, Trinzot. I hope you all make it."

"Chandra's picked up a rumor. It seems something may be planned for your Starbuck. A move to the main building."

"That does it then. We move tonight. Are all your people ready?"

"I think so."

"Then tell them. Tonight."

"All right. Come, Chandra."

Chandra didn't follow her father out of the door. She obviously had something to say to the captain.

"Yes, Chandra?"

"The Starbuck. Nothing can happen to him, can it?"

"I'm afraid it can, Chandra."

"No, it's an adventure, isn't it? It'll be all right."

"I hope so."

Chandra still seemed to view events as fantasies, Apollo noticed. Well, what could be expected? The entire lives of these people were the fantasies of aliens.

"Something bothering you, Apollo?"

Boomer had entered the room quietly.

"Just thinking about the people here. They could get hurt in a scrape like this. They don't deserve that—but they don't deserve to have their lives messed with either. They're so malleable."

"I've noticed. In a way, we're just substituting for the Image Lords with them. We're just another bunch of aliens putting them under our sway. I'm not comfortable with that."

"But we'll free them."

"I hope so."

Apollo noted that Boomer had given him the same response he had given Chandra only moments ago. The coincidence made him uneasy.

He could almost get used to quarters like this, Starbuck thought. Nothing this plush aboard the *Galactica*. All chairs were deeply padded, his bed was soft. The aliens gave him all the food and smokes he asked for. They had indicated he could have anything else. Except, of course, freedom.

Spectre came into the room. Although Starbuck genuinely liked Lucifer, Spectre made him nervous.

"Examine these please, Lieutenant Starbuck."

"What are they?" He stared, amazed, at the item Spectre had placed in his hands. "Cards? Pyramid cards?"

"We wish to ascertain that they meet your specifications. Then we will manufacture several decks. It seems that nobody here has the slightest idea what pyramid cards are supposed to look like. These are as correct as Lucifer can remember them."

"Lucifer? What does he care about pyramid cards?"

"For the game."

"The game?"

"The one you and he will play. When the cards are acceptable, of course. The Image Lords will explain further. Please study the cards. I'll return for them soon."

Spectre left as quickly as he had come in. Starbuck examined the deck of cards. They were, indeed, pyramid cards. While not the most artistic he had ever seen, they fit the bill. The deck contained the correct number of cards and the designs on their pasteboard surface, while slightly distorted, made sense. But why were they planning a game?

In Chameleon's room, a cell just as plush as Starbuck's, the old man was being interviewed by Crutch. Crutch waved his several arms actively as he talked.

"It's come to our attention, old salt, that you are somewhat experienced in the art of gambling."

"Well . . . some. I've dabbled."

"I'd like to see what you can do with these."

He handed Chameleon a deck of cards, identical with that Spectre had shown to Starbuck. Chameleon examined them, tested them for weight and heft, rippled them. They were a little too thick, the kind that a casino could easily mark with hard-to-detect notches which could be felt by the tips of a

dealer's fingers. He laid a few on the surface of a table smoothly, flipped a couple cards up, separated the whole deck in half and then slid the two halves together. He made a few cards stand up. With a quick slight of hand, he secreted a card, then waved his hand in front of Crutch and discovered the card in the hair of the alien's arm. Crutch was pleased by the exhibition.

"Excellent. Clearly you are familiar with a deck of cards."

"A nodding acquaintance, merely."

Crutch took back the cards, stretched his several arms in a fluttery gesture that Chameleon found quite comic, and said, "It's settled then. You will deal."

"Deal?"

"In the game. Lucifer approves. And I'm sure Starbuck will."

"But what—"

Crutch walked out of the cell without answering. Chameleon's fingers idly ripped an invisible deck as he wondered what was going on.

Chandra spread out her treasures on a bright yellow cloth she'd stolen from an Image Lord storeroom. On it she had arranged the cigar and cigar wrapper, the holster, and the piece of jacket fringe she had taken from Starbuck. She smoothed out the wrapper, touched the holster and cigar lightly, and made a circle out of the piece of fringe. Still, the arrangement didn't look right. There were too few items spread on the large cloth. Originally she'd placed two pictures of the Imagescan Starbuck behind her memorabilia. But they hadn't looked right. They no longer looked like Starbuck to her. The facial features of the pictured hero seemed puttied or made of clay. They were too smooth, too neatly structured. The picture-Starbuck's eyes were pale

next to the active and expressive orbs of the genuine article. She adored the real Starbuck's eyes. And the real Starbuck's face had a range of delightful expressions that were never seen on the visage of the Imagescan Starbuck.

She was firm in her wish to help the real Starbuck escape from the Image Lords. Her adventures sneaking into the prison compound had convinced her she could be a hero, too. When the warriors attacked the building tonight, she planned to be with them. Perhaps she could even rescue Starbuck herself.

As she imagined herself leading her hero to freedom, she redid the arrangement of her stolen items on the yellow cloth. The new arrangement was no more successful than its predecessor.

At Starbuck's request, Lucifer explained the devices with which the Image Lords governed the city. Near them, Crutch consulted with his fellow aliens, excitedly working out the rules of the coming card game.

"So," Starbuck said, "they're able to *manipulate* the people of the city through this mess of equipment?"

"Yes. At first the people, newly captured, are conditioned in the prison. Some drugs are used and, in difficult cases, the Image Lord scientists can implant a receiver in the brain. For the most part, however, the simple conditioning is sufficient. When ready, they are integrated into the community and become a citizen of the city, Euphoria. The other citizens accept them as if they have been there all along."

Starbuck whistled.

"Whew! And all parts of their lives are controlled?"

"Yes. Crutch says it is all clear when one views a Summoning."

"What's that?"

"I have not yet seen one. He says that sometime each night the citizens are assembled in a central building in the city. Control over them is renewed through certain conditioning exercises, after which particular orders for the day are given."

"Don't the people have any freedom at all?"

"Some, I suspect. Day to day activities, the kind of event that might be too boring for the Image Lords to supervise. But the overall arrangement of the people's days is governed by choices made by their controllers."

"Aren't there any rebels, any individuals among the citizens?"

"I do not know. If there are, they would probably be discovered and returned to conditioning. Or destroyed. Perhaps the day-to-day renewal of the Summoning keeps them in line."

"It's awful, horrible!"

"Is it? I do not have your kind of values. I cannot judge. The people of The Joyful Land appear to be quite happy, content."

"Maybe they are. But that doesn't make all this right, Lucifer. If they want this kind of life, they have the right to choose it for themselves."

"Really? Well, I am not inclined to accept human views. Cylons would, I think, approve of what the Image Lords do."

"Because it destroys humanity. Of course they would. But they wouldn't be so thrilled if the citizens of Euphoria were Cylons and not humans."

"You are right. Cylons cannot be controlled. The Image Lords do not even bring Cylons to The Joyful Land. They despise Cylons, in fact."

"Well, I'd like to see a few Cylons under—"

Crutch interrupted Starbuck to say gleefully, "It is set."

Spectre stood like a lackey at Crutch's side.

"What is set?" Starbuck asked.

"The game. It will take place tonight. Everything is ready."

"Except me," Starbuck announced, strolling away a few steps. "I'm not ready, fellas. I can't play."

"Can't play?" Spectre asked. "But you're a champion, Starbuck. You are afraid of Lucifer, afraid he will beat you?"

"Of course he'll beat me!"

Starbuck's declaration surprised his listeners. He grinned.

"You are giving up before the game?" said Spectre.

"He can't give up!" Crutch bellowed. "We won't let him—"

"Like to see you make me do it. Still, I'm willing to forfeit. I could beat the bolts out of Lucifer, I'm sure, under ideal conditions. But these conditions are not ideal."

"What do you mean?" Spectre asked.

"As things stand, Lucifer would no doubt beat me because my heart wouldn't be in the game. There have to be stakes, something worthwhile to play for. Else I just fall asleep over the cards. Sorry, fellas."

"Stakes?" Crutch yelled. "That's all you require, stakes? I offer you survival. You will live if you play, Starbuck."

Starbuck's grin got broader.

"You guys just don't understand stakes. I live if I play, no matter whether I win or lose. Back to square one, buddy."

"What kind of stakes do you propose?" Crutch asked.

"Easy. Freedom."

Puzzled, Crutch scratched the top of his head with three of his hands.

"You want your freedom?"

"Not mine, especially. I'd escape from this toothpick and glue setup anyway. No, I mean everybody's freedom. *Everybody*. The prisoners, and the citizens of your happy little town. You'll let them all go, stop fiddling with their lives, let them be free, let them go wherever they want. I will play Lucifer for that."

"But the lives of those people are our lives. We exist to manipulate. We must manipulate. You can't take away—"

"Nevertheless, that's my proposal. I win, everybody is free. I lose, you can have me, my life, anything."

"We will have your life, at the least." Crutch's deep-set fiery eyes studied Starbuck as he pondered the young lieutenant's offer. "The consortium just might approve of this, mate. Yes, they just might. A little risk, some danger. We like unpredictability."

"And that's why you arrange every detail of your charges' lives."

"We schedule the unpredictable. It's built in."

"For them, but not for you. You guys always know what's going to happen."

"Good point, chum. It's true, too. And that's why the consortium will no doubt enjoy your suggestion to gamble. I'll consult with them."

Crutch, as he usually did when he had a purpose, waddled off quickly, all four arms waving excitedly.

"What about me?" Lucifer asked quiedy.

"What about you?" Starbuck said.

"I risk nothing in this game."

"Don't let it worry you, Lucifer. It's not important for you to —"

"You may turn me off, deactivate me, disconnect me. Take away my consciousness. If you win, I will show you how to do

it."

"Lucifer, I don't want to—"

"But there must be stakes. You said so yourself."

Starbuck rubbed his hands together nervously. His face reddened slightly.

"But I kind of like you, Lucifer. I wouldn't want to . . . disconnect you."

"But you will." Lucifer's voice sounded firm. "You will."

Starbuck nodded.

"All right. I will."

Behind Lucifer, Spectre made a strange sound that Starbuck could make no sense of. Lucifer glanced at him. He figured that Spectre would probably like to see him lose. Well, he did not want to give Spectre that satisfaction. He would win.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Chandra, Brynt, and Zossie had been keeping watch for Apollo. They tracked the patrol which took Starbuck from the prison compound to the multidomed building in the city. With Starbuck's group were an older man, no doubt the Chameleon the warriors had talked about, and a pair of metallic beings who appeared to float across the ground. Starbuck seemed quite jaunty, just like the Imagescan Starbuck.

After the group had entered the building, Chandra said, "It's true then. They're doing something with the Starbuck."

"Starbuck, Starbuck," Brynt said, "not *the* Starbuck."

"Oh, shut up, Brynt. We've got to go tell Apollo."

"The Apollo," Zossie said.

"He isn't *the* Apollo," Brynt said, "he's just—"

"Stop confusing her, Brynt," Chandra said.

Brynt threw up his hands in despair as he followed his sisters.

The massive room where the game was to be played seemed like an auditorium to Starbuck, especially with the many tiered seats set around the gaming table. He grinned at Chameleon and said happily, "Spiffy, huh? Look—my lucky colors."

"Which ones?" Chameleon asked, glancing around the varicolored room.

"All of 'em. They're all lucky for me."

Chameleon frowned. Starbuck, expecting a smile from his doting father, put his arm around the old man.

"Something bothering you?"

"Yes, you. You're overconfident."

"Not at all. Just realistic. This game's something I know I'm good at, that's all."

"Like on the *Rising Star* that time?"

Starbuck winced as he recalled the game he would have lost disastrously if Chameleon hadn't talked him into reducing his bet.

"Oh, yeah. Once in a while you lose one. Or two. But I'm the best."

"There's always someone better than you, you've got to believe that. And this time you're playing a computer, for—"

"But he's a computer I taught the game to, don't forget that. Lucifer's never really played anybody else, and he's never beaten me."

"But he's had time—"

"And I've had time. We've all had time. Don't worry, I can feel my luck rippling through my fingers. Why are you smiling?"

"I remember the feeling." Chameleon held up his spidery fingered hands. "Little zingers traveling from the tips of my fingers to my knuckles."

Starbuck gave Chameleon a brief tight hug.

"Hey," he said, "you're a great guy, you know that. For a father, especially."

Chameleon was obviously touched, and he looked away in order to hide the tears that had come to his eyes.

"Let's downplay the father stuff, okay?" he said. "Nobody here knows about that. Better to keep it secret. Maybe better to keep it secret from *everybody*."

"Why? I'm proud of—"

"I know, and I appreciate that. But I think I'd be more comfortable if we didn't tell anyone for now. We can still be

close, but, well, there are people in the fleet who are against the *Galactica* and its commander and—and you know this—its fighter pilots. If it got out I was your father, they might want to use the relationship against you. In political ways. In violent ways." He brushed some lint off Starbuck's jacket. "Look at what happened to Apollo on the *Eureka*. He became a hostage simply because he was the commander's son. With all the resentment, I could be a threat to you."

"But—"

"Look, you know who I am, I know who you are—that's all that's important really. I have a deep fatherly pride in you, and I'll try to live up to any expectations you have about—"

"Don't even say it. You already live up to my expectations."

"But really, Starbuck, I've been, well, a bit of a cad, something of a rogue, in some cases a genuinely—"

"A genuinely admirable son of a gun. Forget it, you can't discourage me. I'll go along with you on the secrecy bit, but you're not going to keep me out of your life any other way."

Chameleon, pleased, ran his finger along the smooth top of the gaming table.

"That's . . . that's good."

"And someday," Starbuck whispered, "we'll say 'I love you' to each other."

Chameleon was too touched to speak. All he could say, after a brief silence, was, "Someday."

The Image Lord audience began to file into the room. Crutch scurried about, making sure everything was properly arranged. Lucifer, Spectre standing behind him, now stood at a position across the table from Starbuck. Lucifer's metallic face seemed to sparkle in the bright light of the room. His red eyes glowed brightly but impassively. Starbuck realized he could use no psyching tricks on this opponent. If

anything, he would just get psyched himself, looking into the emotionless, expressionless face of Lucifer.

Apollo had deployed his troops around the multidomed building. Trinzot stood next to him, with his children lingering expectantly in the background.

"He's in there," Apollo said, pointing toward the building.

"As are most of the Image Lords, it seems," Trinzot said. They'd watched Image Lords, in long lines, file into the building only moments before.

"They seemed to be interested in whatever's going on."

"Chandra said she heard them talking about some sort of game."

"If Starbuck's involved, a game's entirely possible. Is everyone with us?"

"Everyone we could convince to join the assault. The others have agreed not to interfere. That is easy for them. Our lives have been designed for noninvolvement."

Apollo turned toward Trinzot and the other citizens who stood nearby, and addressed them as a commander, "And you're all ready to fight?"

He was not encouraged by their response, which was laconic and somewhat lethargic. Still, they were ready, even armed with their makeshift weapons, assembled from the meager supply of armament they'd been able to locate, along with altered household objects and tools.

Sheba ran up from an advance post.

"Boomer and Bojay have scouted all around the building," she reported. "The only guards are posted at the entrances. Boomer said they're ready to go in."

Apollo nodded.

"Tell them the operation's on. We'll follow you."

"Right."

Starbuck studied the audience all around the gaming table. It was a packed house. He had never seen so many nervously fluttering arms on any species. Still, they were like spectators anywhere, their anticipation of the event palpable, their chatter among themselves rapid and nervous.

Lights had been centered so that they shone equally on the players and dealer. The table sparkled. Starbuck flexed his fingers, tried to feel the luck there. He felt something and wondered if it was really luck. Or was he forcing it into the fingers with his imagination? Could he, after all, always rely on the famous Starbuck luck?

Crutch took a position behind Chameleon.

"Are you ready, Lieutenant Starbuck?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be."

After Crutch had received Lucifer's agreement to begin the game, Spectre leaned down toward his colleague and said softly, "I believe it is the custom to wish you good luck, Lucifer."

"It is the custom of humans who depend on luck. I do not depend on luck. To me, the game is all a matter of mathematics."

"Of course. I merely wanted to show my allegiance and encouragement."

"You always do, Spectre, you always do."

Spectre was not sure how to interpret Lucifer's remark. He realized that his fellow being was capable of a humanlike irony, and he wondered if that was being used on him now.

Lucifer and Starbuck stared across the table at each other. Starbuck tried to make his face as expressionless as his

opponent's. Crutch quieted the crowd, then turned to the players.

"The rules have been reviewed for both of you," he said.

Starbuck and Lucifer nodded yes.

"Are you ready, then?"

"Ready," said Lucifer.

"Ready," said Starbuck.

"And you, Chameleon?"

"Well, uh, yes. Ready, I mean."

Chameleon rippled the cards as he spoke. They made a pleasurable sound to the ears of the two human gamblers.

"Then the game may begin," Crutch said. Anticipation mounted in the audience as Crutch announced: "Deal, Chameleon."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Chandra, crouching in high grass with Zossie and Brynt, watched their father, Apollo, and the rest of the invasion force quietly and efficiently sneak up to the Image Lords' building and subdue the guards at its main entrance. Other platoons were doing the same at other entryways. Apollo waved townswomen into the building. After all the warriors had gone inside, the children followed them in. They soon found themselves in a long wide corridor, not far behind the invasion force. Chandra shuddered as she looked around the barren dark surroundings.

"I think we've been here before," she muttered.

"I don't remember," Zossie said.

"No, they didn't want us to remember. But I'm beginning to."

She shuddered. Up ahead, Apollo shuddered, too, but not from any memory of the place. He was spooked by the eeriness of its labyrinthine corridors.

"I've never seen anything like this," he remarked to Boomer, who walked at his side. "It's larger inside than it seemed from outside. I didn't notice that when I was here with Croft."

"A trick of design probably," Boomer said.

"No, I don't think so. Maybe they can manipulate space as well as people."

Croft and Sheba, hugging the walls of a strange-smelling corridor, led another part of the assault group forward. They passed many empty cubicles. Croft leaned toward Sheba and whispered, "I don't suppose I could talk you into sneaking into one of the side rooms for a little manipulation of our own."

"Oh, shut up, Croft."

"I can see you're not easily manipulated."

"Damn right, Croft."

At the end of the corridor, light showed from between the cracks of a massive double door. Croft tried the door gently, was surprised to see it slide open easily, revealing a large control room where Image Lords sat in front of intricately designed consoles, happily working with a plethora of dials, levers, buttons, and toggles.

Apollo, Boomer, and their platoon of townsmen entered the room through a door at the other side of the room. At a signal from Apollo, both fighting groups descended upon the sitting aliens, who tried awkwardly to resist, flailing their arms wildly and knocking at least five of the warriors out cold.

In a moment the Image Lords in the control room all lay unconscious. Lining themselves up, at Apollo's gesture, the attackers fired what weapons they had into the Image Lords' machinery, setting sparks flying and pieces of solid metal splitting into jagged pieces. With a series of humanlike groans from the machinery the room became quiet. Lights all along the control boards flickered and went out.

Apollo, ordering cease fire, studied the wreckage.

"I suspect there're control rooms like this all over the building," he remarked. "Maybe too many."

"Never too many for stalwarts like us," Croft commented.

Apollo laughed.

"You're as bad as Chandra, treating matters as if they were your fantasies."

Chandra, standing in the corridor outside, overheard Apollo's statement and nearly screamed in anger.

Starbuck and Lucifer had been playing for a long while, with neither gaining a substantial advantage. Parts of major and minor pyramids came together, but in the wrong colors or with matching shapes instead of congruent ones. Both players drew to their hands without luck and had to declare draws and new deals. In spite of the mediocre run of cards both players were receiving, Starbuck did note that Lucifer had picked up many of the finer points of the game and wasn't making the mistakes that might have given an experienced cardsman like himself an advantage. When Starbuck thought he had a few points lined up, Lucifer's skillful counterplay wiped them out. Gaining a few points here, losing some there, neither player had been able to sustain a solid run of cards.

Spectre leaned toward Lucifer, and said quietly enough so that nobody else at the table could hear, "It is a tricky game, Lucifer."

"Is it?" Lucifer said, not wanting to give Spectre any edge.

"I could not play it, I think, and win."

"I am not surprised, Spectre."

Having drawn Spectre's interest and admiration, Lucifer now had an added incentive to win. The victory would at least show up Spectre. Nevertheless, Starbuck's skill amazed Lucifer anew. Some ploys which Lucifer was certain would trick the human somehow backfired as Starbuck neatly overcame them.

"It is time for the players to rest," Crutch, who acted as referee, announced.

Starbuck relaxed, his body suddenly slouching in the enormous and deeply padded chair the Image Lords had provided. Chameleon set down the deck of cards and leaned over toward Starbuck to whisper, "Are you all right?"

Starbuck, his eyes tired and his face slack, nodded.

"Fine," he said. "This's just a tad tougher than I'd expected. But I've won some pretty tough ones in the past, some real zingers. I'm especially good when it looks like I'm finished."

"You've been playing well. I was impressed with—"

Crutch placed a pair of his hands roughly on Chameleon's shoulders.

"You!" he bellowed. "Dealer! You're not supposed to converse with the players. Against the rules."

"I . . . I'm sorry."

Chameleon's left hand rubbed his chin agitatedly, while he nervously ran the fingers of his right hand along the side of the deck of cards on the table.

"It's all right for now, mate. Don't let me catch you two chatting again."

As he stroked the side of the deck, Chameleon noticed almost idly how a few of the cards were frayed in their corners. Using some quick shuffling as a cover, he was able to sneak a peek at what these cards were. He spotted a capstone card in a major suit, a very valuable card in any gambler's game, and also a half-pyramid, a card with great value since it could be used with so many others in major and minor combinations. Looking off thoughtfully, he rubbed his thumb over the frayed portions of these cards, tactically memorizing them. Nobody noticed his clandestine movement. Not even Starbuck, who might have recognized it.

The three children had become separated from the invasion group. They were thoroughly lost, going down eerily dark hallways toward ghostly destinations.

"Where we going, Chandra?" Brynt asked.

"I think we should get back," Zossie whined.

"Hush, Zossie," Chandra said, "we've got to find the Starbuck. He's here somewhere. I can sense it."

Turning a corner, they saw a bright doorway ahead, with a great deal of noise erupting behind it. Although they didn't recognize the sounds, they were the cheers of the Image Lord audience at the resumption of the game. Following the sound, they reached a slightly ajar door. Slipping through, they found themselves on a walkway well above the auditorium. They could see the well-lighted card table and the players. They could sense the many Image Lords crowded into the large room.

"Looka that!" Zossie exclaimed. "It's Starbuck!"

"Quiet, Zossie," Brynt cautioned. "They might hear us."

Chandra studied the action below them, observing, "He's playing some game. Cards. Look at the way he's holding the cards, staring down at them while hugging them close to his chest. This is vital, this game, I can tell."

"Be careful, Chandra," Brynt said. "You know what Apollo said, about you being so easily carried away by your imagination."

"Forget Apollo. Who is he, anyway? He's just a buddy of the Starbuck's. Just a supporting role, far as I'm concerned. The Starbuck's my hero."

"Chandra—"

"Shut up, Brynt. Let's get down there. Maybe we can help him."

The Image Lords were so intent on the game that the children were able to sneak down an aisle, checking every so often on the progress of the game.

Starbuck had two interlocking faces of the major pyramid already in his hand. He traded a nonessential card in, pushing it toward the dealer. Chameleon's hand moved

swiftly. Too swiftly, Starbuck thought. He slipped the new card into his hand before even looking at it. His heart jumped when he saw it was a half-pyramid. That gave him a full pyramid in a major suit, lacking the capstone. A good hand in itself. But, if he drew for the capstone, an even better hand. Such a decision was always a key part of any pyramid game, to settle for the good hand one had, which could lose, or go for all the marbles, trade in another card with the hopes of getting a perfect pyramid. As he considered his strategy, he was momentarily disconcerted by the intensity with which Chameleon stared at him. What was the old man thinking?

Turning his attention to his bland-faced opponent, Starbuck said jauntily, "Well, Lucifer, old buddy, you surviving well?"

"I survive. There is not a question of well in it. Another of your essentially human concepts."

"Yeah, I do seem to be stuck on a few hampering human concepts. Sorry about that. Just wouldn't want to see you blow a few circuits prematurely, that's all."

"You don't have to worry, Lieutenant."

"He's trying to distract you, I can tell," Spectre whispered.

"No likelihood of that," Lucifer said.

"What I said to the human player about no chatter applies to you folks as well," Crutch warned. "No chitchat please."

"We are sorry, exalted sir," Spectre said.

"You could get on a fellow's nerves, sonny."

Spectre, distracted from his obsequious strategy by Crutch's warning, muttered matter-of-factly, "I have been told that before."

Lucifer studied his cards. It was a good hand, a potentially winning hand. The small, or minor, pyramid, so attractive in its lighter colors, more attractive than the darker major

pyramid. The odds against achieving a minor pyramid were great but not so great as the major. Lucifer moved some betting cubits to the center of the table, saying, "I will require no more cards, dealer."

Chameleon glanced at Lucifer, a worried look on his face. He wondered what kind of cards the creature held. His fingers touched a frayed corner of pasteboard, a card near the top of the deck clutched in the palm of his hand. Surreptitiously, he eased that card to the bottom of the deck.

"I'll take one," Starbuck said jauntily.

Chameleon's hand moved swiftly as he dealt the capstone card, the one he had shifted to the bottom of the deck. He noted with pleasure the way his son's eyebrows raised when he had taken a peek at his new card. Eagerly Starbuck started to shove a pile of chips toward the table's center, but his bet was interrupted by the ugly sound of Crutch shouting: "Halt!"

The players and audience all looked abruptly at Crutch who was descending upon the gaming table.

"I not only saw that move," he said sinisterly to Chameleon, "it is recorded."

He pointed toward a monitor screen, giving instructions to a technician to replay the last round. On the screen the players moved with slow motion, Lucifer laboriously pushing his cubits forward. Then there was a closeup of Chameleon's hands. His slipping of the capstone card from the bottom of the deck could be seen clearly. A threatening murmur of hatred came from the Image Lord audience as they slowly saw what Crutch's keen eyes had detected. Chameleon's delicate fingers seemed to flutter with lives of their own as he almost magically substituted the capstone card. The card seemed to float into Starbuck's fingers, to do a brief ballet on its own as he placed it into his son's hand.

Alien guards enveloped Chameleon in their arms, yanked him out of the dealer's chair, and started dragging him away. He didn't resist but lay limp in their arms as they hit his face and body with their free arms. Starbuck stood up suddenly, his legs pushing against the gaming table as he tried to push past Crutch toward his father in the grasp of Image Lord guards. Crutch held him back.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Starbuck yelled.

"He cheated," Crutch said laconically. "You saw the proof."

"I saw. And I'm deeply sorry it happened. It wasn't necessary. But there's no call for your goons to rough him up like that."

"He cheated. We don't cheat. It is a punishable offense."

Crutch's raspy voice was so cold, so judgelike, that Starbuck felt his heart skip several alternate beats.

"Punishable?" he asked in a choked voice. "How punishable?"

"Simple, matey. We alter his personality so that he won't cheat ever again. We change him. He will not even remember clearly who he was."

This news drained the blood out of Chameleon's face. Starbuck paled, too.

"That's barbaric!" Starbuck shouted. "That's worse than an execution!"

"An execution? Well, we *can* kill him, if you prefer."

"I might prefer," Chameleon said weakly.

"You have no rights, cheater!"

Crutch turned away from Starbuck and addressed the guards, telling them to take Chameleon away. His feet dragging, they started to pull him to the nearest exit. Starbuck pulled himself away from Crutch and ran toward the squirming Chameleon.

"Wait!" Starbuck yelled.

His voice must have had impressive authority in it, for the guards halted suddenly. Starbuck whirled around and directed his next words to Crutch, "A friendly wager, Crutch. I'll play your metallic cardsharp there an extra hand at the end of this match. If I win, you guys do nothing to Chameleon. If Lucifer wins . . . if he wins, well, what you were going to do to Chameleon, you can do to me."

"Starbuck," Chameleon protested, "you can't—"

"I will, old man. Well, Crutch, how about it? A good bet for you, right? You guys don't really lose anything. And I'll become your plaything . . . if I lose."

Starbuck's offer silenced every Image Lord in the auditorium. Crutch stared at Starbuck for a long while, then looked around toward several other Image Lords. They seemed to send him a silent message, for his head bobbed up and down in some bizarre type of alien communication.

Starbuck had trouble swallowing, as the extent of the risk he was taking dawned on him. Lucifer was impressed by his human opponent's noble gesture. Gestures like that were almost unknown among Cylons. Spectre was puzzled, wondering if human behavior would always be bewildering to him.

The children had crept down to the first rows of the audience. Their bodies were pressed against the sides of hard metal chairs. Chandra was wide-eyed as she considered the bravado of Starbuck's challenge.

"He *is* the Starbuck," she whispered, more to herself than the other children. "He must be."

Crutch turned slowly around and addressed Starbuck, "It is agreed, Warrior."

Starbuck gulped.

"Right," he said, with a false confidence, and resumed his seat at the gaming table.

Lucifer spoke softly to him, "Do you always sacrifice yourself for other human beings, Starbuck, or do you have a special relationship with this dealer, Chameleon?"

"I'm just an all-around good guy, Lucy."

"I have watched you and Chameleon. There is something important between you, I can see it."

"Blow it out your olfactory circuit."

Lucifer leaned back, then spoke louder, "I am properly chastized. I am sorry, Starbuck."

Starbuck was touched. It was so weird to have anyone representing the Cylon cause apologize to him.

"Ah," he said, "it's all right. Let's play. I'm afraid this hand is dead. We should have a new deck and a new deal. For that matter, a new dealer. Who'll deal now?"

"I would be willing to—" Spectre said, drawing a suspicious look from Crutch.

"I think the responsibility will fall on me now," Crutch said and sat down at Chameleon's place. He called for a new deck.

Chandra could see beads of sweat forming on Starbuck's neck. She was as thrilled by this particular detail as any other. Each thing about Starbuck that she stored in her memory was, in a way, another piece of memorabilia for her.

Crutch broke open the new deck clumsily, his large yellow hairy hands unsuited to his new job. However, after a few awkward ripples, he got the knack. He dealt slowly, making certain that everyone saw he took cards from the top of the deck only.

Starbuck scooped up his first two cards and glanced dispassionately at them. He wasn't pleased. He glanced toward Chameleon, whose pain marred the usually gentle

handsomeness of his face. He raised his eyebrows when he saw Starbuck looking at him, as if to say it was a fool play and I'm sorry, son. Starbuck held back tears as he smiled at his father. So much was going to depend on these games. The fate of the prisoners, the citizens of the city, Starbuck himself, and now Chameleon. Starbuck had to win both games, and here he sat with the worst dodo hand he'd drawn in ages.

He decided there was no point in bluffing. He asked for three more cards, an obvious indication to Lucifer that Starbuck held a bad mix in his hand. However, Lucifer had to ask for two, so perhaps his cards were not exactly heaven sent either.

Starbuck almost didn't want to check out the new cards. He squinted his eyes to look down at them. A warm glow came over him as he realized it had been an excellent draw. He now held the capstone to the minor pyramid and two sides. A good betting hand.

"I'll stay with these," he announced in an emotionless voice.

"And you, Lucifer?" Crutch said.

"These are satisfactory," Lucifer said. He shoved most of his chips into the center of the table. Sweat now dripping off his brow and neck (couldn't Lucifer excrete a drop or two of machine oil just to make Starbuck feel better?), Starbuck matched the bet and showed his cards.

"A very good hand, Lieutenant Starbuck," Lucifer said. "However, my cards are better. They are, in fact, perfect."

Slowly, turning over one card at a time like an old-time cardshark, Lucifer displayed his hand. Starbuck's throat tightened and his heart seemed to sink in his chest. Lucifer had a perfect pyramid, major, including the capstone. An incredible piece of luck! The odds against getting this hand were astronomical.

As Lucifer collected the ritual winnings, Crutch said softly, "I believe you have lost this match, Starbuck. The people, prisoners and citizens alike, remain in our charge. As do you, according to our agreement.

"Good playing, Lucifer," Spectre said, for once the obsequious tone of his voice directed at Lucifer instead of someone in authority.

Lucifer was not pleased with praise emitting from Spectre, nor did he sense the satisfaction he had expected from finally beating the human at his own game. All of the time he had spent studying the mechanics of this rather odd game seemed wasted, since his win had not resulted in skill based on his calculations, but in a silly run of luck. He was also dismayed by the crestfallen look on Starbuck's face. Obviously the man could not believe he had lost. He seemed deflated, smaller. He was beginning to look like one of the city's zombies at the time of the Summoning. And that, of course, was what he was now going to be, now that the game was over. In the power of the Image Lords, he would become one of their zombies. It seemed a dreadful way to lose a bet. Lucifer, made uneasy by Starbuck's sadness, peered at the cards in his hand. He stared at the symbols on the pasteboard surfaces. If one arranged the cards right, they would indeed form a picture of the actuality they represented, a pyramid. Other than that, they were just flat symbols on cardboard. So meaningless—except for the meaning humans put onto them. In the human world so much could depend on a symbol.

Starbuck's voice interrupted Lucifer's meditation on symbolism.

"I, uh, I don't know what to say. Congratulations, Lucifer."

Crutch stood up from the table, waving his quartet of arms about.

"Yes," he said, "a good game, mate. I worried there for a while. Now—"

"Sit down," Starbuck said gruffly. Crutch was shocked at the forbidden tone of authority in the voice of a prisoner, but he sat anyway.

"We have another game to play here," Starbuck said. "For Chameleon's soul, as it were. A new deck, Crutch."

Meekly, Crutch ordered the new pack, unwrapped it without awkwardness, rippled it almost professionally, then stared dumfoundedly at Starbuck.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Starbuck asked irritably. Crutch did not understand.

"Deal, Crutch."

"Yes, Crutch," Lucifer said softly. "Deal."

Crutch, after both players had cut the cards, started laying them out face down, beneath the impassive faces of both players.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Apollo's brigade of citizens became fiercer and more alert as they discovered and destroyed more and more of the machinery which had formerly controlled them. The effects of their attack could be seen throughout the city. Lights went out and power failed. Bewildered people began to wander the streets of their neighborhood, seeing their former friends as strangers, seeing their city as a large cage. Memories of their past, sketchy but vivid, interrupted their confused thoughts.

In the multidomed building Trinzot suddenly grabbed his head and grimaced in pain. Apollo asked him what the matter.

"When you . . . blasted that last machine," Trinzot said, "something . . . happened inside my head. It's like there was something planted there, and it burned out suddenly."

"Trinzot—"

"I am not Trinzot. My name is . . . my name is Belaise. Trinzot is a name the Image Lords gave me after they had . . . conditioned me. I am from a twelve worlds' colony. We were doing research on a jungle planet and these . . . these creatures invaded and brought us here."

"You and your wife?"

"She isn't my wife. Or at least she wasn't. I am a bachelor. Was a bachelor. They brought her here from somewhere else, too. I don't know her real name. The children's, either."

"They snatched the children and brought them here?" Croft said.

"They are not yours?" Sheba asked.

"They . . . don't allow children to be born here. They don't like babies. None of us can have . . . children. We are not

allowed to try."

In a neighborhood close to the multidomed building, three people, two men and a woman, nearly collided with each other, the accident bringing them out of their dazes.

"Where am I?" said one of the men.

"They call this place Euphoria, don't they?" said the other.

"That's true," the woman said. "But how do we know that?"

"I have two lives," said the first man. "One here. And one . . . somewhere else. I don't understand. My head hurts."

"Mine, too," the woman said.

"What are we doing here?" the first man said.

"That's what I'm damn well going to find out," the second man said.

"Me, too," said the woman.

They began to run. They shouted questions to passersby, aroused many to run along with them. Other groups formed in other parts of the city. For the first time chaos and anarchy reigned in Euphoria.

In a still-functioning control room, beguiled Image Lords stared at their monitor screens. They enjoyed the unpredictability of it all, the spontaneity, the unprogrammed events. However, they soon recognized the newfound anarchy was a threat to their manipulative powers and that they should act against it.

"They are out of control," said one Image Lord.

"Start the Summoning," suggested another.

Other Image Lords joined the discussion.

"It is not yet time for the Summoning."

"That makes no difference."

"But we must follow schedule."

"Who says, friend? Let's start the Summoning now."

"All right."

The aliens attacked their controls furiously. With its usual complex set of signals, the Summoning began. All through the building and in the city, people felt the small tugs inside their heads, directing them, confounding them.

Apollo saw Trinzot's eyes become cloudy as his face displayed intense pain. His body gyrated as he tried to resist the urges of the Summoning.

"What's wrong now, Trinzot?" Apollo said.

"They're trying to manipulate him," Croft said. "All of them!"

He pointed toward the other citizens in the room. Some of them were starting to walk toward the door, seeking their assigned places.

The pull of the Summoning reached even into the game room, where the children began to respond to it.

"We must go," Chandra said in a hollow voice.

"Yes," Brynt said, standing up.

"But they'll see us," said Zossie, who was the least affected of the three.

"Doesn't matter," Chandra said. "We must go."

"No!" Zossie said. Her brother and sister stared at her, mystified. Although they weren't used to obeying her, they stood their ground.

"We can resist now," Zossie said. "We couldn't resist before."

"That's . . . true," Chandra said.

"It is," said Brynt. "We can stay here. We don't have to go"

The people in the city's streets and homes were fighting the same struggle as the children. Some of them attempted to form their regular groupings, but others disrupted the orderly lines by pulling individuals off them. Many people,

looking on speculatively, did not respond at all to the Image Lord signals.

Soon there were no lines and the people heading toward the central building weren't in their usual dazed condition. Urged on by the more vocal within their ranks, they meant to question, to seek out the Image Lords and expose their chicanery.

Inside the building, Croft and Apollo struggled to restrain Trinzot.

"Stay with us, Trinzot," Apollo said.

"Belaise," Croft said. "His name is Belaise."

"Stay here, Belaise."

"I . . . I can't. I must go."

"No!" Croft roared suddenly, astonishing everybody else in the room as well as Trinzot/Belaise. "You don't have to do a damn thing they say," Croft yelled. "You're a free man. You got to do something to be a prisoner. You got to deserve prison."

"I . . . I . . ."

Croft slapped Trinzot/Belaise, whose eyes went blank for a moment. When he came out of his daze, his eyes were brighter.

"Apollo?" he said. "Croft?"

"Are you okay, Belaise?" Apollo asked.

"Yes, I think so. I think I am. The pull is gone from inside my head."

Back in the control room, seeing on their monitors that something had gone haywire with the Summoning, the Image Lords labored frantically to put matters back under their control.

"It's a rebellion," one of them said. "A genuine rebellion."

"How picturesque," said another. "How wonderful!"

"It is kind of . . . interesting," said a third.

"This is impossible," said the first. "Increase the intensity of the Summoning."

The Image Lords manipulated their controls more fiercely than ever. On the screens above the consoles they could see that there was some effect, some people abruptly going into the zombie state. However, more people were resisting than succumbing. The effort was awesome for some, as they writhed and squirmed in defiance.

Chandra nearly went under. She grabbed her head and stumbled forward a few steps. Brynt seized her arm and whispered, "Chandra! No!"

She shook her head violently. She felt the control of the Image Lords fading. She pulled away from Brynt, saying, "I'm . . . all . . . right."

Her movement caught the attention of several of the aliens in the audience. One of them hurried to her and pushed her onto the gaming area floor, where one of the guards picked her up roughly.

The guard's sudden move broke Starbuck's concentration. Looking up, he saw Chandra dangling from one of the guard's arms. He stood up, knocking against the table.

"Keep your hands off her!" he shouted, as he approached the guard threateningly. Crutch came up behind him and asked, "You know this child, mate?"

"Do I have to know her to get your thugs away from her?"

"No, I guess not, bud."

Crutch bellowed an order in his own language and the guard gently released Chandra. She lost her balance and fell to the floor. Looking up at Starbuck, she said weakly, "Are you all right?"

Starbuck, touched, smiled at her.

"I'm fine. But I should be asking you that." He helped her up. "How are you?"

"Strange. Things are changing. I don't understand."

Starbuck hugged her. She noticed a wrapped cigar sticking out of his shirt pocket. Reaching her hand upward quickly, she took it from the pocket and hid it up her sleeve.

Starbuck released her and said, "I have to go back to this game. Sit right there. Bring me good luck."

Thrilled with the idea that Starbuck needed her for luck, she eagerly took the seat he'd pointed toward. Starbuck resumed his seat at the table and considered the weak hand Crutch had dealt him. This bad run of cards had to stop. He was lucky to have stayed in the game with Lucifer, who was playing a surprisingly steady and shrewd game. A couple more hands like this one, and this match would be Lucifer's too. Starbuck needed one great hand to turn the game around.

Chameleon watched nervously from his corner, wishing he could break the hold of the guard who restrained him in order to be nearer to Starbuck during the game.

Starbuck barely noticed the Image Lord who came in to whisper agitatedly to Crutch about the violence in other areas of the building. Crutch, unconcerned about any events outside of the game, waved his informant away.

He did not realize the extent of the riot. The citizens of the city were now heading toward the multidomed building in great numbers, ready to storm it if necessary. As the awareness of how much their lives had been manipulated by the Image Lords sank in, they had become quite surly. In the building itself, Apollo's troops were going berserk. They weren't just destroying Image Lord equipment according to Apollo's plan, they were wrecking everything in sight. And enjoying it.

"They're a mob," Apollo yelled to Croft.

"Yeah. Ain't it lovely?"

"Somebody might get hurt."

"Breaks of the game, Captain."

"No. We've got to get them under control."

"They've had enough of outside control."

Apollo ran forward. People slammed by him, knocking him against the wall of the corridor. Croft neatly sidestepped the onslaught, then went to Apollo and helped him up.

"You all right, pal?" Croft asked. Apollo shook his head.

"Yes. What happened?"

"You just found out about the fury of revolutionary zeal, that's all."

Apollo rushed to the sounds of new violence, as lights all through the corridor began to flicker.

Starbuck had never had to concentrate so intensely on a game of cards in his whole previous gambling-fool life. Chandra stared at her hero with bright-eyed admiration. She was particularly fascinated by the many beads of sweat on Starbuck's forehead. A nice touch, she thought, it'd look good on Imagescan. She wished she had some tissue paper so that she could touch it to his forehead, blot it a bit, then add it to her growing collection of Starbuck memorabilia.

In the game neither player had been able to gain an advantage, as the cards continued to fall in lower-scoring patterns. Lucifer and Starbuck had been trading off minor victories and remained even overall. Their concentration was briefly broken by a sudden commotion outside the gaming room. After Crutch told them the noises did not signify anything, the two opponents, like tough card players everywhere, returned to the game.

Starbuck slowly peeked at his new hand. His heart skipped a beat when he saw a major-suit capstone. Gradually he opened the hand and saw that it also contained three of the four sidewalls in the same suit. He just barely held in a smile before glancing coldly toward Lucifer and saying in a disinterested voice, "I'm going to double on this one, Lucifer."

He shoved out a pile of betting chips and studied Lucifer's impassive study of his own hand.

"I will double also," Lucifer said.

"Double my doubling? You must have a hot hand, Lucifer."

"Yes."

Starbuck allowed himself a small smile.

"God," he said, "if I could stand looking like you, Lucy, I would. Your face is the card-player's dream. I can't read anything in it."

"You told me that before, back on Baltar's ship."

"And I meant it then, too."

"But you won then."

"Of course. And I'll win now. How about one more double, Lucifer?"

"Certainly. I, also."

Starbuck tried to make his wiping of sweat off his forehead appear casual. He hoped Lucifer, with his fancy interior sensory equipment, couldn't detect his rapid heartbeat. The doubling factor had brought the point score to the level at which the winner of this hand would win the match. It would be difficult to beat the hand he held. Only the completed major pyramid could beat this arrangement of three sides of the major plus capstone backed up with a complete minor pyramid. And Lucifer had already drawn that hand once, to win the previous match. Still, it was possible, if against the odds, that Lucifer held just such an array of cards. If he did,

then Chameleon was done for. Starbuck glanced toward his father, wondering if the next moment would bring about the old man's doom. He wondered if Chameleon would want him to give up, cancel the hand, as was his right, and attempt to make a bargain with Crutch and his ilk instead of letting Chameleon's fate rest on a single hand of pyramid. As he stared at his father, he watched him slowly raise and lower his eyebrows three times, a facial gesture which Chameleon had once said was an old cardsharp's tradition. It meant to go ahead without fear. Don't cancel the hand. Make your play.

Starbuck started laying out his cards.

"I think it's my game, and match, Lucifer," he said. "Take a gander at these. You'd weep—if it wouldn't rust your cheeks."

Lucifer studied Starbuck's cards for a long while. As he did, he fingered his own hand idly with his long metal fingers. Then he made an indecipherable sound and tossed his cards on the table face down.

"You win, Starbuck. Congratulations."

Chameleon let out a long-held breath. Starbuck discovered that he'd been swallowing hard for a long while. Pains shot through his legs and untensed them.

Spectre slid forward, saying, "Lucifer, that means . . ."

"I will be disconnected. Deactivated. Yes."

"Lucifer," Starbuck said, leaning forward, "look, you don't really have to—"

He was interrupted by an explosion of human voices outside the main door to the gaming room. Everyone's attention was drawn to that door, as the people outside began to pound on it. With a loud cracking sound, the door sprung open and the mob poured into the room. The Image Lords were so astonished by their unexpectedly violent

citizen-rebels that they made scant resistance to their charge. The people, using their homemade weapons, attacked any equipment they saw. Those that didn't break equipment started to demolish the bleachers on which the now-scurrying aliens had sat. The few Image Lords that tried to fight back were easily subdued in spite of their size. Weapons were knocked out of the hands of guards before they could fire them.

Enthralled, Chandra watched the action. No Imagescan adventure had ever presented a riot like this one. It was marvelous.

Two men, perceiving Lucifer as just another kind of alien, jumped on him and wrestled him easily to the ground. Starbuck bolted around the table and pounced on Lucifer's attackers. Picking up each of them by the collar, he yanked them aside. They tried to fight back, landing a couple solid blows on Starbuck's face, but he decked them easily with a couple of right hooks. Chandra watched the fight eagerly, happy to see her hero perform like his Imagescan counterpart. When he turned around and she could see his face, she was amazed to see a thin stream of blood coming out of his nose. The Imagescan Starbuck had never bled.

Starbuck whirled around when his name was shouted. He saw Apollo and Boomer come into the room, Croft just behind them.

"You guys look familiar," Starbuck said happily. "You come here often?"

"Just to rescue fallen warriors, fella," Boomer said, embracing Starbuck.

The commotion had died down, and the revolutionary fervor was gradually disappearing from the attackers. As the noise dwindled, Starbuck heard Chameleon's voice cry out weakly, "Uh . . . Starbuck?"

Starbuck spun around and saw his father held tightly in three of Crutch's four arms. The other arm held a lasergun which he was pressing tightly against the old man's head. Starbuck strode cautiously toward Crutch.

"Take a good look around you, Crutch," he said. "You're beaten, all of you."

"Maybe," Crutch said. "But I won't be anybody's prisoner, mate."

Starbuck nodded.

"Okay. The deck is yours, sailor. You deal."

"Free passage back to my ship. Free passage out."

Starbuck glanced toward Apollo, who shrugged agreement.

"Sure, Crutch," Starbuck said.

"My crew, also."

"Always glad to see a captain who takes care of his crew. Send out the call, Crutch."

Clutching Chameleon tightly against his body, Crutch backed out of the game room with surprising smoothness. Apollo and Boomer were next out of the door, and Starbuck was a few steps behind them. At the door he felt a hand touch his arm. He looked down and saw the delicately manufactured digits of Lucifer.

"Starbuck, our bet," Lucifer said. "You promised—"

"Not now, Lucifer. That man who's Crutch's hostage—he's my father. I've got to go."

"I understand."

Lucifer stepped back as Starbuck went out the door. Chandra brushed past him. Stopping in the doorway, she shouted back to Brynt and Zossie, "Come *on!* We got to see this!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

There was nothing more irritating to Borellian Nomen than to hear a nearby riot well in progress and not be able to participate. Maga paced his cell with fury as the noises of the riot neared.

"I will die," he said, "if I have to stay in this cell much longer."

"Patience, Maga, patience," Bora cautioned.

The commotion reached the corridor of their cell block. Maga leaned against the iron bars, straining to see out. Instead, he saw nothing and could only hear the bellowed slogans of the rioters.

"The Image Lords' hold is broken!"

"We are free!"

"Our minds are out of prison!"

Maga turned away from the cell door and asked Bora, "What do they mean?"

"I don't know."

One of the citizens appeared suddenly on the other side of their cell door.

"We're freeing you, fellows," she said. "Any moment. Any moment now."

She looked to her left, then smiled as she seemed to see a signal. The Nomen's cell door sprang open.

"See?" the woman said. Pushing her aside, Maga and Bora hurtled out of their cell. They were quickly joined by others of the Nomen band. All were intent on the blood trail as they bulled their way through the mobs in the corridors of the building and in the yard outside.

Bora, utilizing his heightened blood hunt senses, attempted to locate their prey. He felt nothing. Turning to Maga, he asked, "Do you sense the trail?"

"Yes," Maga replied, his voice gruff with hatred. "He is not far away."

Their tracking sense led them unerringly toward the Image Lord airfield. Many ships were spread across the immense acreage.

"He is close, Bora," Maga muttered.

"Yes, I can sense it now also."

All the Nomen thrilled with the excitement of the hunt. Their nostrils quivered, their hearts beat fast, their hands curved with desire for the kill. A Noman on the hunt became larger, stronger. A stark redness was deepening on the visible skin of their faces.

The people, even those still incensed with mob impulses, stopped and made way for the troupe of Nomen as they dashed down the hill toward the airfield.

"He is over there!" Maga shouted.

He pointed toward a group of people in the middle of the field, crossing to Crutch's ship. Crutch, his unwieldy size towering over the attendant humans, dominated the scene. The members of his crew, their arms waving almost hysterically, were coming from various points toward their spacecraft. In Crutch's arms, Chameleon lay still, although his active eyes searched for an escape. He had not yet seen the Nomen.

"That is him!" Maga yelled. "He is ours!"

"Yes," Bora said.

"It is the end of the blood trail."

"We are with you, Maga."

He plunged forward, leading the Nomen on a route that would intersect with his prey at a point next to Crutch's ship.

Starbuck, his face set in grim anger, followed Crutch, ready to jump the alien at any opportunity. Chandra loved the grim, set-jawed look. It, too, reminded her of the Imagescan Starbuck.

Apollo and Croft led the way toward Crutch's ship. Occasionally, Apollo glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Starbuck wasn't about to try anything risky.

The group stopped beside the ship. The crew immediately started boarding it. When they were all aboard, Crutch backed onto the gangway, his gun still pressed against Chameleon's temple.

"All right, Crutch," Starbuck shouted. "You can release my fa—Chameleon now."

"Release him, mate?" Crutch said, his voice sounding quite innocent and naive.

"Of course. We've fulfilled our part of the deal. You and your crew have been returned unharmed to your vehicle. So—release him."

Without disturbing his hold on Chameleon, one of Crutch's arms waved playfully.

"But, old salt," he said, "I can't do that. We require him as our hostage."

Starbuck, inflamed with anger, stepped threateningly toward Crutch, shouting, "Hostage?"

"Yes. I can't trust you folks to allow us out of this sector. Your ships are faster, your firepower better. No, my chum Chameleon here is taking a little trip with us. I like his company, I do."

Starbuck, his fists clenched, his arms waving and ready to fight, stepped toward Crutch, but was stopped at the rim of the gangway when Crutch pressed his gun harder against Chameleon's temple. The old man winced. Starbuck's pause allowed Apollo to pull him backward.

"No, Starbuck," Apollo said. "These creatures don't care anything about life. They'll kill him."

"But, Apollo, I can't let them take him."

"That is correct," the booming voice of Maga announced, as he lumbered forward. Shoving Starbuck and Apollo aside and into the grasp of his Nomen colleagues, he announced to Crutch, "That man is ours, alien."

"You mates again?" Crutch said disdainfully. "You come near me, I'll kill him. I vow—"

"That is our privilege," Maga said. "We will kill him."

Now Chameleon's life was in jeopardy from two sides, Crutch and the Nomen. Starbuck, squirming in Ling's grasp, looked around for help, for intervention. Ramming his elbow into the stomach of his captor, he loosened the Noman's grip enough to break it. Running forward, he leaped into the space between Crutch and Maga.

"You're still on that blood trail, Maga?" he said, trying to talk as calmly as he could. "I thought—"

"Out of my way. I will be happy to kill you, too, if necessary."

Apollo, who'd freed himself from the Noman holding him, walked forward, saying, "Not if I have anything to say about it, Maga."

He drew his lasergun. Several other colonial warriors in the group followed suit. All the guns were directed at Maga. Maga viewed the array of weaponry with disdain.

"We are willing to die to fulfill our blood hunt," he said.

"You'll have to," Starbuck cried, and lunged at Maga. The Noman, strong as he was, was caught off guard by Starbuck's sudden move. Starbuck wrestled him to the ground, and dazed him with a backhanded blow to the side of his head. Seeing the Noman was temporarily immobilized, Starbuck sprung up and lunged toward Crutch, who was backing himself and Chameleon up the gangway.

"Stay back, Starbuck," Crutch yelled. The echoes of his horrendous voice seemed to bounce off the trees of the nearby forest.

"Do as he says, son," Chameleon said quietly. "I'll be all right. Really."

"But—" Starbuck said.

"Don't worry. We'll get together again. In some casino, probably. On Earth maybe. I promise."

"Father—"

Chameleon seemed about to say something more, but instead he shouted a warning as the revived Maga came up behind Starbuck and flung him aside. Starbuck danced to regain his balance as Maga started up the gangway. Crutch flourished the gun threateningly, obviously ready to shoot Chameleon. To save his father's life, Starbuck had no choice but to leap on Maga's back. Grabbing the Noman around the neck, he wrenched it backward violently. Maga lost his footing, and the two battlers rolled inelegantly down the gangway to the ground.

Crutch laughed in his loathsome way, and the echoes from it rattled all the glass in the area.

"Good show, Lieutenant Starbuck," he said and, the sadly smiling Chameleon in his arms, he backed into the ship. The gangway disappeared into its slot as the hatchway closed. The still-struggling Starbuck and Maga were pulled away from the ship by the others, colonial warriors and Nomen alike. With a fiery thrust, Crutch's ship lifted quickly from

the field. Maga and Starbuck, their fighting done, watched the ship rise into the skies over The Joyful Land.

Starbuck turned to the Noman and smiled wistfully, saying, "Looks like you got to call off the blood hunt again, Maga, old pal."

Maga gave Starbuck his stoniest stare, then joined his fellow Nomen. They all now faced the drawn weapons of colonial warriors. Their skin had lost its red color and their bodies were no longer so large and awesome. At a nod from Apollo, they were led off, to be kept in confinement until the return to the *Galactica*, where their actions would be judged by the proper authorities.

Apollo reholstered his weapon and walked to Starbuck. Looking into the skies, he saw that Crutch's ship was no longer visible.

"Poor Chameleon," he said. Starbuck responded in a choked voice:

"Ah . . . he'll be all right. He's the kind always winds up all right."

For the first time Apollo noticed the tears brimming the rims of Starbuck's eyes.

"You're crying."

"It's the wind out here. Fierce."

Apollo wondered if he had really heard Starbuck address Chameleon as father.

"It's almost as if . . ."

"As if what, Apollo?"

"Oh, nothing. You really did like that old man, didn't you?"

Starbuck shrugged, seeming not to feel the line of tears coming out of the corner of each eye.

"He was okay," Starbuck said. "Hate to see him taken off like that."

"Me, too." Apollo put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Look, buddy, we got some mop-up work to do here. I think we've won."

Starbuck nodded.

"Okay, let's go."

"You don't want to be alone for a while?"

"Why should I want to be alone?"

"I don't know. Just thought—"

"Let's hop to it."

They had taken a few steps when Starbuck noticed Chandra loitering nearby. She appeared to be upset.

"Excuse me, Apollo," Starbuck said. "You go on. I'll catch up."

Apollo had seen Chandra, too, and he understood.

"Sure," he said, and walked on.

Starbuck walked casually to Chandra and knelt beside her. He wiped away some of her tears with his fingertips. "Something upset you, kiddo?" he said.

"Why . . . why do you ask that?"

"You've been crying."

"So have you. I didn't ever see the Starbuck cry before."

"Chandra, I'm not the Starbuck. He's fake. I'm real."

The tone of her response was regretful.

"I know. I know that."

"Is that true, or are you telling me a tale?"

"True. I can see you're not the Starbuck. They took away the old man. You failed. The Starbuck never fails. That's why he's the Starbuck."

The girl's words made Starbuck feel like bawling. He held Chandra tightly while he tried to control himself. When he felt steady again, he put her at arm's length and spoke to

her softly. "And that's the difference between the Starbuck and me. He can't fail. He always wins. I can fail. I can win twenty card games in a row, but lose an important one. I can even die sometime. The Starbuck can only die if the designer of his adventures decides to kill him off, or if all the Imagescan control boxes break. He's just a fantasy."

"I can see that," Chandra said. When Starbuck's eyebrows raised, she added hurriedly, "Really. I can."

Starbuck smiled.

"And I'm cuter. And more charming. And wittier."

"Gee, I don't know about that."

He hugged her again, saying, "If you say so. You all right now?"

"Yes."

He stood up.

"I gotta go. We have work to do. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Sure." She watched him walk away, his stride becoming jauntier and like an Imagescan hero's with each step. She called to him, "Starbuck?"

He turned, saying, "Yes, Chandra?"

"When you go, will you leave me your *Battlestar Galactica* insignia?"

Starbuck laughed. His laugh sent several echoes around, but in a much nicer way than Crutch's had.

"Maybe," he said. "I'll see."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A new morning had come to The Joyful Land. Citizens of Euphoria went about their usual routines, performing them in ways not essentially different from the day before. But they *were* different in one important respect. The people were no longer under the control of the Image Lords. What they did now, they did because they wanted to.

Since they'd been under the many thumbs of the Image Lords for so long, they were still uncertain how to structure their lives anew. For the moment, they were content just doing what they'd always done, going where they'd always gone, speaking as they'd always spoken. Until they had had some time to get used to their newfound freedom, they would be more comfortable with life as it had been.

Belaise was one of the few who was already considering changes. He knew it would take some time to reorient his friends and neighbors. They'd have to get to know themselves first. Then they'd need leaders, people who could raise the society of the city from its moribund state, and help those who wanted to leave The Joyful Land find the proper routes to their former homes. People would have to be tabbed as leaders, people like Belaise himself.

Watching Diova perform her household chores while he finished cleaning the breakfast dishes, Belaise realized he would rather continue to live with her than with anyone he'd known at his previous home—a colony which, according to information supplied by Captain Apollo, probably didn't exist anymore.

Diova, coming up behind Belaise, said the words that were in his mind, "I'd like to stay here. For a while, at least."

He put down the dish he was scrubbing and hugged her, speaking quietly in her ear.

"Yes, I feel that way, too. I'd like to help people. Help them get started. Help them find their own personalities, let them see their alternatives."

"We can do that."

He broke the embrace so he could look into her eyes.

"What should we do with the children?" he asked.

"Give them their own choices. When they're ready. In the meantime . . ."

They both looked out the kitchen window at the children, who were now playing in the back yard. They seemed so happy together, so happy with Belaise and Diova.

"In the meantime . . ." Belaise muttered.

Starbuck was amazed at the destruction that had been wrought in the gaming room. Technical equipment had been demolished. Wires hung dangerously out from the walls. The bleachers were in ruins. The gaming table itself had been turned upside-down.

For a moment he didn't see Lucifer and Spectre. Lucifer stared at him with those intense red lights that passed for eyes in the creature. Spectre stood slightly behind him, holding a few playing cards.

"You wanted to see me, Lucy?" Starbuck said, reaching toward the sleeve pocket of his uniform, intending to withdraw a cigar. He was surprised to find the pocket empty.

"Yes," Lucifer said. "About our bet. You won the game. Now you have the honor and duty of disconnecting me, disengaging my vital circuitry. I will show you how."

Starbuck shifted nervously from foot to foot. He was distressed by Lucifer's request.

"Hey," he said, "look, Lucifer, we're enemies and all, and I have to fight you when the situation calls for it, but I don't

think I can, what you say, disconnect you. That'd be like killing you, wouldn't it?"

Lucifer glided slowly forward, as if offering himself to Starbuck for execution.

"I suppose," he said, "in your terms the act might be metaphorized in that manner. But I do not die."

"Well, what happens then? Will you have consciousness, existence?"

"Not in the way you understand those terms. I will be no longer functional."

"But you'll be able to . . . to bring yourself back."

"No, I have shut off the self-revival mechanism already. And anyone trying to revive me will merely set off a series of explosions which will destroy my circuitry and render me completely useless, merely a twisted pile of material to be sent to a junkpile for recycling."

Starbuck rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. His neck was beginning to sweat profusely.

"Lucifer," he said angrily, "I release you from the conditions of our bet. It was a dumb bet, anyway. So just forget all this disconnection crap."

"But I cannot do that, Starbuck. The bet was established, agreed to. It must be, as you say, paid off. Come, Starbuck, I will show you how."

Starbuck leaped backward as Lucifer came near.

"No, no, no. Buzz off, Lucifer! I won't do it. Simple as that, I won't do it."

Starbuck eyed Lucifer closely, looking for a reaction. The creature stopped sliding forward and said, "Very well. Your performing the act was only the called-for ritual, but we need not follow ritual. It is not necessary for you to participate. I can deactivate myself."

"Lucifer—"

"Lieutenant Starbuck, I do wish you to know that, of all humans, you were the one I most liked and respected."

Lucifer, looking like a dancer finishing the dance, moved his arms quickly, in one graceful sweep. Reaching to the box inside his chest, he made a few skillful manipulations. Some sparks shot out from his chest, then he went limp. His arms dropped heavily to his sides. Slowly the red lights of his eyes slowed to a stop and went out. Even the sheen of his face seemed to grow duller.

Starbuck, with Spectre, stared at the dead-eyed Lucifer for a long while in silence. Finally, Starbuck said, "Spectre, is he —"

He couldn't finish the sentence. Spectre moved closer to Lucifer to examine him more closely. He saw that all of Lucifer's functions were off.

"Yes, Starbuck, he is."

Starbuck stepped toward Spectre and gestured wildly.

"Well, you know how he works. Bring him back. Turn him on again!"

Spectre fiddled with a few switches which might have put some power into Lucifer, but nothing happened.

"There is nothing I can do. He has anticipated such attempts and irremediably locked all circuits from interference."

"But there must be something you can do. Take him apart and put him back together again alive."

"That would not be possible, I'm afraid. Lieutenant. You heard what he said. I observed the self-destruct device to which he referred. We cannot even tamper with him."

The life seemed to go out of Starbuck's body. His arms, too, hung limp at his side, and he stared at the floor.

"Then he is dead?" he said.

"In effect."

Starbuck stood still for a long while, then anger took hold of his body and he strode forward. Standing on his toes so that he could look into the creature's nonfunctioning eyes, he muttered, "Lucifer, you stupid bastard!"

Then abruptly, he whirled around and walked rapidly out of the gaming room.

Spectre glided to Lucifer. He again examined him, then looked down at the cards he was holding in his own thin metallic fingers.

"I must admit," he said, "that the lieutenant, in his emotionalistically human way, has a definite point, Lucifer."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Croft stayed at Sheba's heels all the next morning as she directed the squadron of Vipers from the *Galactica* in landing on the Image Lord airfield. The maneuvers of the spacecraft in the skies above The Joyful Land had been impressive.

When all of the Vipers had landed, Croft resumed his assault. "What say, Sheba darlin'?"

"I say what I've always said. No and no and no."

"Ah, but they're hopeful noes."

"Croft, don't you ever know when to stop?"

"If I'd known when to stop, I wouldn't have done so much time in stir. Don't you find me at all appealing?"

"Not much."

Croft looked toward the hill, where Apollo could be seen in conversation with Belaise.

"It's Apollo, isn't it? You're hung up on him?"

"I'm not, as you say, hung up on anybody. Just leave me alone, Croft."

"For now, my darlin', for now."

He walked away arrogantly. It was the arrogance in his stride that prevented Sheba from running after him to renegotiate his offer.

Apollo stood with Belaise on the hill above the airfield, watching the landings of the Vipers.

"It is agreed, then," Apollo said, turning to Belaise. "The Image Lords will no longer toy with the lives of the people here."

"They say they will leave The Joyful Land. They couldn't stand it here under the new conditions. They seek adventure, but elsewhere now."

"I hope they find no more species to manipulate." Apollo wondered if the Image Lords could exist without subjects to enslave.

Belaise resumed his report. "Some of our citizens—only a few, I'm afraid—have expressed the desire to be transported to your fleet and find new lives there."

Apollo was surprised.

"Do they realize what they're getting into?" he asked. "It's a much sparser existence on the *Galactica* and the other ships. Not as comfortable as here in The Joyful Land."

"They realize."

Cadet Hera ran up the hill to Apollo, shouting his name.

"Yes, Cadet?"

"The shuttle from the *Galactica*. It's arriving. We should be seeing it any moment."

Searching the skies, they found the speck that was the *Galactica's* shuttle. It zeroed in on the airfield effectively, and made a neat pinpoint landing. Apollo was impressed. Few pilots aboard the *Galactica* could handle a shuttle that well. When the doors opened and Commander Adama stepped out, Apollo knew then why the shuttle had been piloted so effectively. His father had always been a master pilot.

Apollo ran forward to greet Adama.

"Apollo!" Adama yelled. "I'm so glad you're all right."

"I'm fine, Commander."

While they addressed each other as commander and subordinate, they embraced as father and son. Both struggled to hide their feelings. As Adama separated from

the embrace, he said, "I brought one of the crewmen with me who'd like to see you."

"What—?"

Adama gestured toward the shuttle entry way. Standing there now, a yapping Muffit beside him, was Boxey, a shy smile on his face. Apollo grinned broadly. He went to the child and swept him up into his arms. The daggit jumped up and down at their feet.

"I wanted to see you right away, Dad," Boxey said.

"Glad you did, Boxey," Apollo said.

Starbuck came around the side of the shuttle. He stopped abruptly when he saw Apollo hugging his son, and Adama looking proudly on. He brushed back some tears himself as he observed the scene, with its two sets of fathers and sons. Their warmth together painfully reminded him of his own lost father, of Chameleon wriggling in the arms of the repulsive pirate, Crutch. It seemed that Starbuck was destined always to lose his father just when they were on the verge of the kind of relationship he now viewed with admiration and envy.

Hera, seeing Starbuck looking so sad, walked to him and put her arm around his shoulders.

"How are ya, pal?" she said.

"Who, me?" Starbuck said, realizing that in the bright light of the airfield his tears were obvious. "I'm fine. Great."

"You look it. Say, Lieutenant Boomer told me to tell you the squadron's awaiting your orders."

"Well, we have to run equipment checks before returning to the *Galactica*. Let's go, Cadet."

"Yes, sir."

Hera kept her arm around Starbuck's shoulders as they headed for the squadron. After a few steps, she said

suddenly, "Hey, Starbuck. About what happened back on the *Galactica*, my chasing you and all—"

Starbuck, apprehensive, stopped. Hera's arm dropped from his shoulder. Uncomfortably he looked up into the lovely dark eyes of the tall cadet.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Well, don't put much stock in it. We Vaileans get kind of . . . well, overenthusiastic. I've decided to leave you alone, if that's the way you want it."

"Hey, don't be too hasty."

Hera smiled. They resumed walking.

"You certainly are an unpredictable louse," she said.

"Take it easy on the sentimental affectionate names."

She touched his upper arm, saying, "Say, what's wrong with your uniform?"

"What?"

"The rips at the shoulder."

"Oh. Must have been something happened in a fight."

"You lost your ship insignia."

"Oh, yeah. Guess I did."

Starbuck grinned but offered no further explanation. Hera discovered that her Vailean romantic curiosity was stirred anew by the young lieutenant's enigmatic ways.

The ships of the *Galactica* flew once over Euphoria before heading back to the fleet. Citizens of the city came out of their houses to wave good-bye to the warriors who had freed them.

Chandra heard the noise of their flight but didn't go outside. She hadn't wanted Starbuck to leave and certainly didn't care for a last sight of the ship that was taking him.

Brynt and Zossie had scuttered out of the room, leaving behind a Starbuck Imagescan adventure which they hadn't been enjoying, anyway. The real Starbuck had made them lose their zest for his Imagescan counterpart.

Chandra listened to the sounds of the ships fade. Then she returned to the collection of objects which she had spread out on a cloth in front of her. Along with her array of Starbuck's cigars, there was the holster (which he'd searched for unsuccessfully in the forest), the cigar-wrapper, the piece of fringe from his buckskin jacket, and her newest acquisition, the *Battlestar Galactica* insignia he had given her as a parting gift. She touched each and every one of these objects and pressed the insignia to her cheek.

Someday, she thought, the Starbuck would return.

Or she would go and find him.

EPILOGUE

Although the configurations on the controls of an Image Lord ship were not familiar to Spectre, he had figured out how to pilot the craft easily. Nothing was impossible to an IL series Cylon. None of the Image Lords, all of them busy with preparations for their own exodus away from The Joyful Land, had noticed Spectre's stealing of one of their ships. They had not even noticed him laboriously carrying the immobile Lucifer across the field and into the ship.

Now, speeding away from the planet, Spectre stared at his deactivated companion and made his plans. As nearly as he could read the directional gauges on the alien control board, he figured he was traveling in the general direction of Cylon-controlled sectors. His return to the Cylons, and especially to Imperious Leader, would be triumphant. They would be happy to discover he had information they could use to track down the long-pursued and hated *Battlestar Galactica*.

He contemplated the odd-looking shell Lucifer had become. Terribly confused by Lucifer's action in deactivating himself, he wondered how and why his colleague had done it. He had always thought that creations of the IL series were programmed to preserve themselves against any threat. The concept that one could voluntarily turn himself off was, until Lucifer's action, unknown to Spectre. How could Lucifer have done it? Had he become too human, so human he preferred his own version of death to dishonor?

Well, Spectre vowed, he would get this shell of Lucifer back to the Cylons, perhaps even to Baltar's base-star, then he would use what knowledge and information he could acquire to find a way to bypass Lucifer's self-tamperings. Even if he did not succeed, he would be able to add to the knowledge of the potentials of ambulatory sentient

computers. Such discoveries could draw him abundant praise—and promotion.

If he did succeed in reviving Lucifer, the victory would be especially savory. How would Lucifer react to being revived by his archrival? Spectre longed for that moment, longed to observe how Lucifer would react.

Perhaps, if he was especially adept, he could change certain features of Lucifer's personality, maybe even make Lucifer his own servant. That would be acceptable. Quite acceptable.

Whatever happened, it was essential to Spectre that he solve the mystery of Lucifer.

Reaching into a compartment at his hip, Spectre pulled out the cards that Lucifer had thrown in during that last game with Starbuck. As he had done several times, he examined the cards on the basis of what knowledge he had been able to acquire about the game. For all he could figure out, it seemed that Lucifer had had the winning hand when he threw in the cards without revealing them. At least, Spectre believed that the hand contained a major completed pyramid.

But that was impossible. He must not understand the game properly. Lucifer could not possibly have cheated. Could he?

Image Lords, in their usual frantic arm-waving fashion, clomped around the pirate ship with abandon. It was difficult to keep out of their way. However, Chameleon, emerging from the shadows, had managed it. He had escaped from his captors almost immediately after the ship had been set on a course. Since that time, he had skulked around the ship like a ghost in search of a proper haunting. Search parties had nearly tracked him down several times, but always he

evaded their grasp in his usual slippery and graceful fashion.

Working methodically, stealing food where he could and sleeping in the most uncomfortable niches, he had found his way to the pirate ship's launching bay. Now, in front of him, unguarded because the Image Lords had conceived of no need to guard it, was the shuttle from the *Galactica*, the one that had originally transported Apollo, Croft, and Sheba to the *Eureka*. It was part of the plunder from the pirate's raid. Chameleon, crouching in the shadows, had seen Crutch enter the ship, after touching almost ritualistically the *Galactica* design on its side. He had longed to follow the alien into the shuttle and club him many times over the head, but had wisely waited. Crutch came out soon after and continued on his way.

Slowly he made his way to the shuttle. Prying open the hatchway, he quickly slipped inside. He breathed easier when he saw there no Image Lords inside the ship itself.

He went quickly to the cockpit and sat in the pilot's seat. He stared at the controls as if they were dangerous living beings.

"Now, let me see," he said aloud. "My son showed me something about how a crate like this operates."

He studied the controls, touched dials, toggles, and gauges, then briefly placed his thin, long-fingered hand on the joystick. Taking a deep breath, he flipped a couple of toggles while moving the joystick. Then he worked a third one and, with a jolt that raised him momentarily from his seat, the ship roared into action.

"Oh, my goodness," he said.

Looking out the cockpit viewport he saw several aliens, alerted by the clamor, rushing into the launching bay.

"Have to get moving fast."

He pushed the joystick gently forward and the shuttle began to move. Getting used to its operation, he ran the shuttle around the launch bay in a large circle, forcing the aliens to scatter. As he swung around to make his final run to freedom, he saw Crutch come stumbling into launch bay. He looked annoyed. But, oddly, he waved toward Chameleon in an almost friendly way with two of his arms.

Chameleon saw the launch tunnel in front of him. Leaning on the joystick, he made the shuttle zoom toward it. The quick acceleration brought him to the edge of the tunnel sooner than he was ready for it, but there was no turning back. He zoomed out, and away from the pirate ship.

After he had proceeded to a point where he could no longer see the pirate ship, he relaxed, and started experimenting with the controls. Many of them responded in ways he could understand.

"Not so tricky after all. Wonder why Starbuck makes such a mystique out of it. Anyone can fly one of these scows."

He peered at all the controls he hadn't figured out yet.

"Well, all I got to do is get this crate back to the *Galactica*."

He stared out the viewport.

"I wonder which direction that would be?"

Reaching into his sleeve pocket, he took out a pair of Scorpian dice, the kind with many tiny sides to them. Flinging them to the floor at his feet several times, he recorded their numbers each time on a dirty sheet of paper. When he was done, the figures represented the coordinates of a course. He leaned against the back of his seat and pointed outward, to his left.

"That way then," he said.